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The Negro in Hollywood
Films

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by V. J. Jerome

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About the Author

The text of this booklet is an expansion of a lecture, "The Negro in Hollywood Films," delivered at a public forum held under the auspices of the Marxist cultural magazine, *Masses & Mainstream*, at the Hotel Capitol, New York, on February 3, 1950.

The lecture, which dealt with fundamental and theoretical aspects of the film medium and the Negro question, and which projected a rounded program for uniting Negro and white Americans in the fight against chauvinism in the film and other cultural areas, was received with enthusiasm by the audience, and its publication urged upon the sponsors of the meeting.

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His new novel, *A Lantern for Jeremy*, is being published by *Masses & Mainstream*.

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NOT SO LONG AGO the entertainment trade journal *Variety* announced in its slick corporate cant, "‘More Adult’ Pix Key to Top Coin." For those who are not initiated into this monosyllabic jargon let me explain that this means that the more serious motion pictures are now a source for richer revenue. It is clear that the devil must be ill indeed to want so fervently to be a monk. The worked-to-death formulae, clichés, stereotypes, and taboos of the venal screen have not proved so profitable of late. Or, as the president of the Motion Picture Association of America, Eric Johnston, conceded, in addressing Hollywood's big studios:

America is growing up and films must catch up with that "phenomenon."

And as Gilbert Seldes wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* for September, 1949:

Statistics were on Mr. Johnston's side. At the time of his talks, the nine most profitable pictures included three that were definitely aimed at intelligent adult audiences (*Hamlet*, *The Red Shoes*,* *The Snake Pit*) and three others (*Joan of Arc*, *A Letter to Three Wives*, *Command Decision*) were far out of the ruck of violence and sentimentality.

Hollywood's "New Look"

Of course, increasingly frequent admissions of this kind are not to be taken as a sudden change of conscience on the part of the Hollywood studio magnates for having debased

* *Hamlet* and *The Red Shoes*, which were distributed in the United States, are British-made pictures.

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their cultural product for over half a century. Rather, they should be seen as a bow to the compulsions both of the home public and of the foreign market. When Eric Johnston says that "America is growing up," he acknowledges that there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the current Hollywood product. When he says that "films must catch up with that 'phenomenon,'" he looks for new ways to carry out the ideological aims of the monopolists through the screen medium and to overcome falling box-office receipts.

These economic pressures from home and abroad stand out in sharp distinctness when seen in the larger political context of the postwar expansionist program of American Big Business and its bipartisan administration.

Profits apart, Hollywood's glamour-films are counted on to serve as "cultural" missionaries aiding in "softening up" the Marshall Plan countries to accept their status of underlings of Wall Street. Thus, the head of the Motion Picture-Photographic Branch of the Department of Commerce has actually been urging the appointment of a European Film Attaché, with the status of a Minister, "to serve and advise the U.S. Embassies" in these countries, "because of the significance and importance foreign governments attach to film matters."*

But, sadly for the monopolists, the season for their missionaries—cultural or otherwise—is growing short, and Hollywood has been hard pressed in its attempt to spread the gospel according to St. Marshall. Far from being softened, the people in Europe and in Asia are hardened into resentment by the Hollywood film fare, as is attested by many facts and by commentator after commentator.

In our own country, and to a much greater degree abroad, increasing numbers of movie-goers and popular organizations have conducted unprecedented campaigns and struggles against the Hollywood "culture" of violence, sadism, degradation, racism, and anti-Sovietism. This mounting resentment has been manifested in the numerous struggles against the showing of the Soviet-slandering film *The Iron Curtain*. In the United States, protest campaigns, picket lines, and mass

* *Variety*, November 7, 1949.

demonstrations occurred in New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Denver, Milwaukee, Dayton, New Bedford and many other cities. On a world scale, there were picket lines against the film in such major cities as Toronto, Montevideo, Delhi, Sydney, Wellington (New Zealand), Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Milan, and Venice. In the United States, the film trade papers plaintively admit the colossal box-office failure of the rash of Red-baiting films—*The Iron Curtain*, *The Red Menace* and *I Married A Communist*.

The same journals stress the box office popularity of the latest cycle of films on Negro subjects. The analysts of box office currents seek to ascribe the success of this film cycle, as against the failure of the Red-baiting films, solely to the artistic superiority of the former. But the simple fact of rejection of Red-baiting content and of the tremendous interest in any film approaching a dignified portrayal of a Negro proves a more critical popular attitude than Hollywood would admit.

This growing international resentment is to be seen, further, in the gathering support, here and abroad, for the cause of the Hollywood Ten against the un-American thought-controllers. Outstanding actions were the Amicus Brief addressed to the Supreme Court for the reversal of the conviction of screen-writers John Howard Lawson and Dalton Trumbo of the Hollywood Ten, with over 200 Hollywood actors, writers, and directors among the signers, and the resolution of the International Film Congress, held in September, 1949, in Perugia and Rome, which "urges all European and American organizations of film workers and all other cultural and pro-democratic organizations to protest this persecution of the Hollywood Ten."

The resentment is further seen in the rising struggles of film workers and other democratic forces in France, Britain, Italy, etc., against the Marshallized undermining of the native film industries. In France, the Committee for the Defense of the French Cinema, a broad coalition movement launched in May, 1948, at a mass demonstration of professional and audience groups, has demanded the abrogation of the Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946, which gives American films a priority of 9 to 4 on French screens without reciprocal arrangements. In

England, the Association of Cinematograph and Allied Technicians, at a big meeting held in December, 1949, pointing to near-bankruptcy and mass lay-offs in the industry, demanded a sharp curtailment of Hollywood films in British theatres.

The resentment is further manifested in the many protests and picket lines in various American cities against the recent re-issue of the Kluxist film *The Birth of a Nation*; in the fact that, in 1948, 14,000 Philadelphians, Negro and white, including Mayor Bernard Samuel, signed a petition to Eric Johnston, protesting the offensive treatment of the Negro by Hollywood.* The Negro press and Negro people's organizations have carried on a constant campaign of protest against Hollywood's white supremacy pattern, a pattern manifested either in flagrant racism or in the utter ignoring of the existence of the Negro people. Further, in the trade unions, "talent guilds," and other organizations of Hollywood film artists and workers, resolutions have increasingly been adopted calling for an end to Negro stereotyping, and, more recently, for a truthful, full and dignified portrayal of Negro life, as well as an end to discriminatory practices in employment. A typical example of what Hollywood films face on this question in the colonial countries is the resolution submitted in 1949 by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, member of Nigeria's Legislative Assembly, to that body, for the banning of "films which are derogatory and humiliating to the Negro race." Not least, the increasing revulsion against typical Hollywood "culture" is to be seen in the growing world-wide popularity—wherever their exhibition is not prevented—of the truthful and superior films produced in the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies, as well as films created by progressive artists in Western countries.

A reflection of this state of affairs in the postwar years is to be seen in a statement by Martin Quigley, publisher and editor of motion-picture business papers. In the course of an

* The petition, known as the "Mile-Long Petition," from the fact that the scroll of signatures stretched eight city blocks long, is now on exhibition at the Washington office of the Motion Picture Association of America.

article extolling the Hollywood product,* Quigley broke into his panegyric with the angry words:

Yet in the halls of Congress, there have recently resounded such intemperate remarks as the assertion that the films shown abroad are portraying the U.S. as "a nation of morons and gangsters." . . .

Let me leave without comment Mr. Quigley's modest defense that Shakespeare too has his "murder, theft, and intrigue." More to the point is his statement:

But such of these impressions as may be inconsistent with the role which the Nation has assumed in world affairs properly becomes the subject of grave concern to all thoughtful persons.

In other words, if the Nation (read: Wall Street) is to maintain its lofty pretensions as "world leader," it cannot go on without change from the old-line film product that exposes its most vulnerable basic attitudes.

The monopoly owners of America are confronted with the task of turning the powerful mass propaganda medium of the film to full account, as a part of their war program, aimed at world domination. Thus they are compelled to acknowledge the wide distaste for the Hollywood product among audiences abroad. Their anxiety mounts at the evidence that the treatment accorded the Negro on the Hollywood screen exposes the Wall Street "dispenser of democracy" as a false Messiah. The world-wide criticism of anti-Negro discrimination and terror in the United States is noted with grave discomfort by many apologists for American imperialism who have travelled abroad. Thus, Walter White, of the N.A.A.C.P., stated upon his return from a round-the-world tour that he had encountered everywhere "questions about the contradiction of American ideals of freedom and racial and religious discrimination in the U.S." He sought to alarm the white ruling class into realizing that such incidents of discrimi-

* "Importance of the Entertainment Films," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November, 1947, pp. 65-69.

nation "are used with devastating effectiveness by the enemies and critics of the United States to discredit American democracy" (*California Eagle*, November 3, 1949).

Hence, the need of American imperialism for a "new" brand of films. This brand is designed to beguile the peoples of the Marshallized countries with respect to its treatment of the Negro people, as well as to mollify the colonial peoples, who feel a sense of fraternity with the American Negro in the common anti-imperialist struggle. The "new" brand of films attempts to show that the Negro in the United States is being better treated, and hopes to cover up the imperialist Jim-Crow oppression of the Negro people.

At home the American ruling class, which always seeks to adjust its tactical use of the various propaganda media at its command to new political developments, is confronted with a rising movement of the Negro people. This political upsurge following World War II occurs in a situation that differs greatly from that which followed World War I, when the trade-union movement did not count masses of Negro members in active participation and the employers could split the workers' ranks on the "race issue." Today, organized Negro workers constitute an organic part of the American trade-union movement, notwithstanding persisting white-chauvinist policies of the dominant leaders in the A. F. of L., C.I.O., and Railroad Brotherhoods. In the great economic struggles of organized labor since the war's end the Negro workers have played an outstandingly militant role. The effect of this marked progress in the trade-union sphere has been to advance considerably the leadership of the Negro workers in the Negro people's movement, as well as to strengthen the solidarity of Negro and white workers.

The Negro people emerged from the anti-Axis war resolved to fight at home for that democracy and that equality which the United States had proclaimed as its cause before the world. Postwar reaction hit the Negro masses hardest, in the furious bipartisan offensive to rob them of their war-time gains and to impose on them the main burden of the developing economic crisis. The white ruling class set out with new lynch-orgies, unspeakable police brutality, and intensified

terror to put the Negro "back in his place." But it had to reckon with an aroused movement and a gathering militancy among the Negro people, and with a strengthened bond of Negro-white popular unity.

And every fresh blow for freedom by a people under imperialist oppression—in Korea, in Indonesia, in Viet-Nam, in Malaya, in the Philippines, in Africa—arouses the solidarity of the Negro people here. What new stirrings of hope, what new flashes of their oncoming freedom the liberation of the Chinese people has sent into the hearts and minds of the American Negro masses! With what deep-felt concern the Negro people here have reacted to the ruthless imperialist attempts to crush the national independence of Korea and to enslave its long-suffering, freedom-loving people! And no thought-control can repress, no war-mongering anti-Sovietism can quench the Negro people's admiration for the Soviet Union—that multi-national Socialist state—where the principle of true freedom and brotherhood of nations and peoples everywhere has but recently been symbolized in the gigantic rock-hewn head of Paul Robeson rising high on that mountain-peak in the Caucasus which now bears his name.

The anger and fighting mood of the Negro people are evidenced in all areas of struggle upon the American scene. In the words of Robert Thompson (*Political Affairs*, June, 1949):

In the present period, the Negro people occupy a unique position in the front of struggle against American imperialism. Everywhere they are the first targets of the growth of fascist reaction and chauvinist nationalism. Everywhere they are resisting and fighting back. At a time when American imperialism is proclaiming the divine right of Anglo-Saxons to run the world, it is confronted with a mounting struggle of 13 million Americans of African descent for a position of equality in American economic, social, and political life. The Negro people are a unique ally of the American working class.

These are the facts that are behind the Truman Administration's "New Look" posturings before the Negro people. The President's "Civil Rights" fanfare, in conjunction with the

entire "Fair Deal" and "Welfare State" masquerade, expresses fear of the growing militancy of the Negro people, in the context of the strengthened position of the world peace camp. And the compulsions upon the counting-house in Wall Street and upon the White House in Washington have their reflection in the studio of Hollywood.

With this political situation for background, we are now in a position to discuss the current series of Hollywood films dealing with aspects of American Negro life.

The Underlying Strategy

The treatment of Negro themes and characters by Hollywood during the past fifty years has borne a clear relationship to the concrete political program of monopoly capital in each successive period. Each phase of Hollywood policy in this regard must be considered in the frame of reference of the particular stage of the Negro people's movement, and of its alliance with the American working class.

While making certain concessions on the screen, designed to "adjust" to the Negro people's forward movement, the controlling interests have sought tenaciously to retain the clichés and discriminations of the past in one form or another. *These concessions, being tactical in character, have always been utilized by monopoly capital with a view to furthering and strengthening its basic strategy.* The objective of that strategy is to perpetuate the odious myth of "white supremacy" in order to hold back the developing labor-Negro alliance for the common struggle against fascism and imperialist war; to weaken the fight of the trade unions and white progressives for a Fair Employment Practices Commission bill, for the abolition of the poll tax, and for the outlawry of lynching; to prevent the organization and the full integration of the Negro workers into the trade unions, in order to hamper the unification of the white and Negro workers in a powerful American labor movement. It is the objective of that strategy, at all times, to undermine the movement of the Negro people and to prevent it from developing its full force, and to keep the Negro people from understanding the true basis and nature

of their oppression. The objective is to keep them from understanding that the lynch-law and Jim-Crow discrimination and segregation are inspired by Wall Street and Southern landlord reaction.

The objective is, furthermore, to keep from the Negro people the scientific teaching of the Communist Party that their oppression is *national* in essence, and that their struggle is fundamentally a struggle for national liberation.

Finally, it is the objective of that strategy to weaken the ties of the Negro people with the white workers and other popular allies and thereby to retard the general working-class struggle for emancipation from capitalism. It is the aim of that strategy to isolate the Negro people's movement and rob it of self-confidence, thus to prevent the Negro people from taking the anti-imperialist road to national liberation.

Roots of Hollywood's Racism

The fact is that the imperialist credo of chauvinist nationalism and "white supremacy" dates back to the very origin of commercial film making in the United States. It is no mere chance that the very first dramatic film, which was shown in 1898, the year in which American imperialism, fully emerging, announced its "Manifest Destiny" with the launching of the robber war to wrest colonies from Spain, bore the title *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*. Not less significant is the fact that in 1901—barely two years after announcement of the "Open Door" policy for the spoliation of China—the public was subjected to the racist film *The Boxer Massacres in Peking*, designed to "prove" that the anti-imperialist struggle of the Chinese people constituted a "yellow peril" to "white civilization." *Street Scene in Peking*, released the same year, portrayed British police in front of their Legation breaking up a demonstration of Chinese "unruly citizens."^{*}

The imperialist mythology of the *Anglo-Saxon super-type* was methodically cultivated in a variety of motion pictures, of which *Fights of Nations*, released in 1905, was perhaps the

^{*} *Edison Catalogue*, 1901.

most viciously chauvinist. In that picture the Negro was caricatured as a "razor-thrower," the Jew as a "briber," the Mexican as a "treacherous" fellow, the Spaniard as a "foppish lover," the Irishman as a "drunkard," while in the final tableau the United States was presented as the bringer of peace to all the nations. As a contemporary trade publication described it: "The scene is magnificently decorated with emblems of all nations, the American eagle surmounting them. In harmony, peace and good will the characters of the different nations appear, making it an allegorical representation of 'Peace,' with the United States presiding at a congress of Powers."^{*} How prophetic of the day when this imperial eagle would seek to commandeer the United Nations into line for atomic "Peace"!

The policy of setting native against foreign-born, white against Negro, non-Jew against Jew, of dividing all in order to conquer all, but with the special, racist design to keep the Negro people upon the bottom rung of the ladder—that has been the studied policy of the rulers of this land. In this service they have methodically used the film medium.

The economics and politics of "white supremacy" were reflected in film after film that maligned, ridiculed, and disparaged the Negro people. Not only was Negro life ignored, not only were the struggles and aspirations of the Negro people undocumented, but such characterizations of Negroes as were given were the vilest caricatures, the most hideous stereotypes, designed to portray the Negro as moronic, clownish, menial, and sub-human. One need only bear in mind such characteristic titles as *Rastus in Zululand* and *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, which were made about 1910; the equally insulting *Sambo* series, which were turned out between 1909 and 1911; and the above-described *Fights of Nations*. To that high level of capitalist culture belonged also the series of shameful racist screen "comedies of errors," typified by *The Masher* (1907) and *The Dark Romance of a Tobacco Can* (1911), in which a man in romantic pursuit of a woman discovers the object of his quest to be a Negro woman. With such impudence was the chauvinist "morality" presented!

^{*} *The Moving Picture World*, March 9, 1907, as quoted by Louis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, New York, 1939, p. 75.

The ruling class, be it remembered, had long before the advent of the cinema betrayed the Negro people in the South to the counter-revolutionary plantation oligarchy. The Hayes-Tilden perfidy of 1876 had sealed the restoration to power of the Bourbons in the post-Reconstruction state governments of the South. In the opening years of the century, with the newly emerged epoch of imperialism marked by "reaction all along the line," the completion of the systematic disfranchisement and segregation of the Negro in the South was carried out in flagrant violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Colossal fraud, terror, lynch-law, and the Ku Klux Klan ruled the South to keep the Negro in "his place." The "white supremacy" stratagem served the Southern plantation feudalists and the controlling finance capitalists of Wall Street as an ideological mainstay of their white ruling-class oppression. Wall Street's Manifest Destiny ideology, first projected to rationalize the brutal oppression of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Cuba, and in its latter-day form of the "American Century" serving to conceal designs for global conquest, found expression at home in the white chauvinist ideology used as a weapon to oppress the Negro people. This ideology increasingly permeated the bourgeois cultural field in all areas. The "white superiority" cult enforced the misshaping of American history and social science as a whole to a Bourbon bias.

Toward the opening of the second decade of the century—roughly from 1910 until the outbreak of World War I—a new trend came into evidence in the treatment of the Negro on the screen, side by side with the continued slap-stick, low comedy films of the past. The new trend was the Uncle Tom ideology.

To understand this turn, we need to see the political and social background of the United States during the years immediately preceding World War I.

It was a period of "popular distempers" and mass stirrings, brought to a head by the severe economic crisis of 1907. It was a time of strong anti-trust currents among all sections of the people, of agrarian discontent, of mass wrath against the spoils system and against corruption in administration. Anti-militarist sentiments pervaded the country; everywhere demands

rose for the outlawing of war. The woman suffrage movement was gaining momentum, together with the struggle for equal rights for working women.

It was a decade of significant advances in trade-union organization and of bitter strike struggles. Those were the years, too, of the growth of the Socialist Party and of mass socialist sentiment, which was registered, in the Presidential elections of 1912, in a vote of 900,000 for Eugene Debs. Within the Socialist Party a tide of struggle had set in, marking the rising challenge of the Left-moving proletarian rank and file to the petty-bourgeois opportunist leadership. The great defense movement of 1906-07 in behalf of the framed-up leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone, which forced their acquittal, further evidenced the temper of the workers. Thus, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1906 to a leading senator: "The labor men are very ugly and no one can tell how far such discontent will spread."

To stay "this rising tide of discontent," the bourgeoisie, by a division of labor, both intensified its exploitation of the masses and assumed the reformist mask. This was evidenced especially, during the 1912 election, in Roosevelt's demagogic attempt to capture the popular vote with his "Bull Moose" offshoot of the Republican Party. As in the simple binary fission of the one-celled amoeba, science could reveal no basic organic difference between the "Grand" Old Party and the Rough-Riding "Progressives." Capital trotted out its most consummate hypocrite in the Messiah-tongued Woodrow Wilson, whose "New Freedom," purporting to blow taps over the trusts, proved to be a proclamation of unlimited license for corporate plunder.

These developments found their reflections in the film—basically and predominantly carrying the message of reaction, but also expressing to a very minor degree the militancy of the people's struggles.

In those years immediately preceding World War I, there emerged a series of anti-trust films, and a number more or less sympathetic to labor. *The Power of Labor* (1908) showed industrial workers on strike carrying their struggle to victory, *The Egg Trust* (1910) served to expose profiteering in food.

Tim Mahoney, the Scab (1911) dealt with the shame of a worker who betrayed his union brothers. Another film with working-class sympathies was *Locked Out* (1911). Notable in this series was the screen version of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1914).

The period of mass ferment before World War I involved also the continuing struggles of the Negro people, marking the beginnings of the present-day Negro liberation movement. These struggles inspired to action a section of Negro middle-class intellectuals, advanced in thinking and fired with zeal for the freedom of their people. Under the leadership of W. E. B. Du Bois, then a young professor at Atlanta University, there sprang into being in 1905 the militant Niagara movement. Its birth was a Declaration of Independence challenging the dominance of the Booker T. Washington ideology of accommodation and acquiescence to the white ruling class, of dependence on the good graces of the white bourgeoisie for "improvement" of the Negro people's "lot." The Niagara organization made clear its stand, in the ringing declaration of its spokesmen: "We claim for ourselves every right that belongs to a free-born American, civil and social, and until we get these rights we shall never cease to protest and assail the ears of America with the stories of its shameful deeds towards us."

Although the Niagara movement was short-lived, its effect on the white ruling class was unmistakable. Recognizing the growing ferment among the Negro intellectuals, the capitalist masters of America worked assiduously to "take over" the leadership of the emerging movement of the Negro people. To this end, they sought to impose on the movement a deadening "patronage," which could only have the effect of retarding a militant movement of the Negro people, led by Negroes and consciously directed toward national liberation.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People appeared in 1910 and reflected in its origins both that militancy and that patronage. The former was shown in the fact that nearly the entire membership of the Niagara Movement merged with the N.A.A.C.P.; the latter in the fact that the new organization's entire official leadership, with the lone

exception of Dr. Du Bois, was composed of whites. As Harry Haywood remarks in his *Negro Liberation*, “. . . with the launching of the N.A.A.C.P., a new pattern in ‘race’ leadership was set. It was the pattern of white ruling-class paternalism which, as time went on, was to cast an ever-deepening shadow over the developing Negro liberation movement, throttling its self-assertiveness and its independent initiative, placing before it limited objectives and dulling the sharp edge of the sword of Negro protest.”*

In the face of these developments in the political sphere, the screen portrayal of the Negro could not continue solely on the buffoon level of the *Rastus* and *Sambo* films. Hollywood continued, and even extended, its depiction of the Negro as mentally “inferior,” continued his relegation to slap-stick roles. Yet, simultaneously, the times compelled something of a tactical departure from the old stereotype. Thus, there emerged in a number of films of that period a “sympathetic” Negro type—the classic Uncle Tom.

The Uncle Tom theme found expression in such films as *For Massa’s Sake* (1911), *The Debt* (1912), and *In Slavery Days* (1913). The first of these shows a “faithful” slave who tries self-sacrificingly to discharge his white master’s gambling debts by offering himself for sale.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin itself appeared during these years in three film versions, with distorted emphasis upon the theme of Uncle Tom’s devotion to little Eva, thus eliminating Harriet Beecher Stowe’s central indictment of slavery.

It was also in this period, during 1911, that *The Battle* was directed by D. W. Griffith, who, four years later, was to make *The Birth of a Nation*. *The Battle* set a precedent for all future Hollywood pictures dealing with the Civil War. It romanticized the Old South and the “sweet slavery days.” It crystallized for film audiences all the high-flown, hypocritical legends of the slavocracy—the “generous” colonels, the fine, indulgent masters, the “happy, carefree state” of the plantation slaves portrayed side by side with their “brutishness.”

What was the significance of all these pictures? Essentially,

* Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, New York, 1948, p. 181.

they represented a shift in tactic to counteract the new liberation movement of the Negro people, as well as to hold back Negro and white unity. The main stereotypes of the Negro—"primitiveness," "childishness," and "buffoonery"—could no longer serve as sole rationalizations of "white supremacy." Uncle Tom was needed.

The tactic was designed to erect a barrier against the rising mood of struggle for Negro rights. Servile acceptance of inequality, collaboration with imperialism, nostalgic beatification of slavery—this has been the thesis of films dealing with the slave South and the Civil War during the forty years since. It implies also a slanderous belittlement of the North's role in the Civil War, which itself has come to be treated as a "mistake" and its result as an "illegitimate" victory.

During that time, too, to make the tactic more effective, Hollywood began to release its series of "white supremacy" films dealing with the "curse of mixed-blood." Those racist melodramas, typified by *The Octoroon* (1913), clearly were designed to stamp the Negro people as "social pariahs" for whom there was no liberation and with whom there was no association. The "mission" of such films was to accomplish, under new conditions, in the "serious" and "tragic" way, what the utterly slap-stick, low-comedy pictures had been manufactured to do in their way.

But as the war drums began to beat, this tactic was found wanting. Hollywood made a decisive turn with the outbreak of imperialist World War I.

Woodrow Wilson's call in August, 1914, upon Americans to be "impartial in thought as well as in action" was but the opening note in that ascending scale of monstrous demagoguery which served the re-election of He-kept-us-out-of-war Wilson—five months before he plunged us into war.

Involvement of the United States in the war was plotted from the first by the dominant circles of Wall Street imperialism. The ominous signs were present in the increasing direction of United States trade to the side of the Allied Powers, beginning with 1915; in the functioning of the House of Morgan since mid-1915 as central purchasing agent for the Allies; and in Washington's "benevolent neutrality" toward Britain's

illegal blockade of United States shipping, in contrast to the stern notes addressed to Germany against her blockade.

War preparations demanded charging the atmosphere with the ideologies of jingoism, chauvinism, racism, and brutality. Wall Street's plans for empire demanded the glorification of the white American "super-race." On the home scene this meant intensified attacks upon the Negro people. The flames of hatred were kindled against the Negro people in line with the policy of visiting the war burden upon the Negro and white toiling masses as a whole. To cope with the mass anti-war sentiment which prevailed over the land, it was necessary to undermine the markedly developing Negro and white alliance. The anticipated war production, which would necessarily absorb many Negro workers into industries, had to be guaranteed against the solidarity of Negro workers with white workers. With the cessation of the influx of cheap foreign labor consequent upon the outbreak of the war in Europe, Northern manufacturers had begun to stimulate the Northward migration of Negroes from the South. Even before the incentive of jobs in the North, that migration had started, as an escape from the unbearable conditions in the South. "Justifications" had to be prepared for residential segregation of Negroes, for the Jim-Crowing of Negro soldiers in the impending war, for the shameless overwork imposed upon uniformed Negro "labor battalions" in European ports and supply centers, and in general for the increased national oppression of the Negro people.

Thus, we read in Du Bois' autobiographical account of that period:

With the accession of Woodrow Wilson to the presidency in 1913 there opened for the American Negro a period lasting through and long after the World War and culminating in 1919, which was an extraordinary test for their courage and a time of cruelty, discrimination and wholesale murder.*

It was in 1915 that Hollywood, in keeping with its main strategy, produced *The Birth of a Nation*, which Wilson

* W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, New York, 1940, p. 235.

praised in the words: "It is like writing history with lightning."

It is highly significant that Hollywood's first "super-spectacle," the longest and costliest film produced to that date, should have been a lying extravaganza glorifying slavery and vilifying the Negro people!

Ir, prior to that, the Negro had been stereotyped as clown or Uncle Tom, he was now disfigured as "beast." The foulness of capitalist "culture" has never been more glaringly revealed. By viciously falsifying the Negro's role in the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, by monstrously contriving scenes like that of the Negro legislators in session "lounging back in their chairs with their bare feet up on their desks, a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a leg of chicken in the other . . . the while intimidating white girls in the gallery with nods, winks and lewd suggestions,"* this picture set the style for all future slanders of the Negro people and distortions of the Reconstruction period. The film, concretely, aimed to "justify" the denial of civil rights and equal opportunities to Negroes, and to rationalize frame-ups, terror, and lynchings, as both "necessary" and "romantic"!

A storm of protest arose when the film was released. Many theatres exhibiting it were picketed. Foremost in this campaign against the picture were the Negro people themselves. The protest actions of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People encouraged other sections of the population, including prominent individuals, to engage in the fight. As a result, the film was banned for a time in a number of states.

The picture has been revived repeatedly since then, even during World War II, at which time vigorous protest from the Negro newspapers, as well as from the Communist press, particularly the *Daily Worker*, forced its withdrawal. The pledge of the Chief of the Bureau of Motion Pictures of the Office of War Information that the film would not be shown again has, like many such bourgeois promises, been broken. Today this foul and vicious spectacle is again on display in various parts of the country.

* Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films*, London, p. 37.

No doubt, *The Birth of a Nation* contributed to the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, which it glorified—an organization which by 1924 counted five million members.

From that time on, all Hollywood pictures dealing with the South or the Civil War have had a pro-Confederate bias. In not one is the North shown to have waged the just side of the war, or to have legitimately won the war against the slave-owners. Such pictures have proved an ideological support for the alliance of Wall Street and the Southern plantation system in all its racist, pro-fascist, imperialist policies.

In the thirty-five years of capitalist film-making since *The Birth of a Nation*, that picture stands out as the classic example of Hollywood's ruthless basic strategy with regard to the Negro people, not yet masked by such tactical adjustments and maneuvers as became unavoidable in after times.

It is unnecessary to detail the course of those minor changes in the intermediate period, from film to film and from type to type. The operation of a constant strategy, despite variations of tactic, that we have traced in the course of the first seventeen years of commercial film-making in the United States, could be shown as equally dominant through the subsequent period—from the "prosperity decade" following the First World War, through the "depression years" and the "New Deal era," to the Second World War and the "peace" years since.

The "Negro Interest" Films

It is against this historical background that we must examine the new series of Hollywood "Negro interest" films so far represented by *Home of the Brave*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and *Intruder in the Dust*.*

One key question can lead us to a keener understanding of these films, and their role in monopoly capital's blueprint for dividing and conquering. It demands the fullest analysis and the clearest answer. For with these films Hollywood has forged

* Hollywood has since added *The Jackie Robinson Story* and *No Way Out*. These films continue the pattern analyzed in this study.

a new ideological weapon. It now assumes the appearance of a crusading sword, raised in defense of the Negro people. But what hand holds the hilt? Is it aimed accurately at the deep roots of oppression—or is it aimed and wielded, after all, against the Negro people? Let us watch the sword in action.

Our key question, then, is: Does this new film cycle signify a real advance in Hollywood's treatment of the Negro?

It cannot be disputed that, in a formal sense, these films seem to leave behind the traditional Hollywood cliché Negro. Their central themes and character do not seem to bear the mark of the Uncle Tom stereotype; or the viciously libellous sub-human brute type; or the "comic relief" calumny à la Stepin Fetchit; or the bucolic myth of laughing, singing, romping, happy-all-the-day field hands possessed of the mentality of children and blessed with a natural contentment that makes the idea of freedom a rude, Northern interference.

In each of the four motion pictures, we get the formal, outward aspect of a serious and dignified presentation of the Negro, in a full-drawn, central role. The hero or heroine moves through unfolding dramatic situations that are calculated to evoke (within the limitations of the film's ideology) the sympathetic response of the audience for the Negro protagonist. The composite Negro protagonist emerges from this film series with qualities of moral courage, devotion and principled conduct. Not all of these qualities apply equally to each of the Negro central characters in the films. Nevertheless, we have in these films what would seem at very long last the Negro come into his own in the screen drama.

So obviously does this represent a sharp departure from Hollywood's past patterns that, to those who are content with first impressions, these films constitute nothing short of a revolutionary change. Regardless of what must be said in criticism—and what must be said here is *fundamental* criticism—it would be anything but realistic not to see in this new screen depiction of the Negro the fact that the advancing movement of the Negro people, together with their white labor and progressive allies, has forced a new tactical concession from the enemy. At the same time, it would be even more unrealistic not to see in this very concession a new mode

—more dangerous because more subtle—through which the racist ruling class of our country is today re-asserting its strategic ideology of “white supremacy” on the Hollywood screen.

Let us examine the films themselves, matching reality against appearance, in theme and content, and in mode of presentation; comparing total impression with presumed intent, in the messages these films convey to the millions.

The New Stereotype

We begin with *Pinky*. The film deals with a Southern Negro young woman, named Pinky (a slang term for a light-complexioned Negro who can pass for white). While studying in Boston to become a registered nurse, Pinky (Jeanne Crain) falls in love with a white doctor. Unable to tell her suitor of her Negro origin, Pinky runs away from what has become for her an impossible situation. She returns to the South, home to her washerwoman grandmother, Aunt Dicey (Ethel Waters). There, she again encounters the real life of her people at first hand. The young Northern doctor, who follows her to the South, where he learns from her that she is a Negro, urges her to marry him, on condition however that she return North with him, “come away from all this,” and keep from the world her Negro identity. She spurns his request. He leaves. At the insistence of her grandmother, much against her will, Pinky consents to nurse an aristocratic, cantankerous, old woman—Miss Em (Ethel Barrymore)—who is dying in her decaying plantation mansion.

From an early revulsion, there comes about a mutual attraction between Pinky and this hard-shelled woman with the “heart of gold.” The change is not too clearly motivated, although an indicated factor is Miss Em’s detestation of her designing relatives. The old woman dies and—has bequeathed her estate to Pinky! Pinky, however, does not find it easy to inherit “white” property. Miss Em’s relatives challenge the will. Pinky fights courageously for her rights. And—God’s in his heaven: All’s right with the South—Pinky is awarded the estate! Her new property is converted into a combination

nursery-clinic-training school for Negroes, over which she presides, to live happily ever after, as the fairy tale ends.

That is the bare narrative. What are this picture's positive values—values that the people have forced upon Hollywood?

First among this film's positive aspects, then, are the indicting scenes of exposure. The wretched facts of discrimination in the South are memorably etched in several scenes, perhaps the sharpest of this kind in the entire film series.

There is the scene in which the police arrest two Negroes, a man and a woman. Pinky, who is with them, is at first mistaken for white. She is gallantly deferred to by the policemen, who "protect" her from the Negroes at her side. But Pinky defiantly declares herself to be a Negro. Instantly, there is a change in the conduct of the police toward her. We see white ruling-class justice, the only Southern justice, suddenly rip off its mask of chivalry to reveal itself as the racism we know it to be. This is a great, overpowering moment of film realism.

Later, two joy-riding white youths attempt to rape Pinky in a scene of terrifying, dramatic impact. White rapists in a Hollywood film! A rare flash of truth on the American screen, which has the effect of exposing the "rape" libel used to frame-up Negroes as a bestial falsehood, devised to conceal the notorious actuality of legally protected white ruling-class rapism.

The indictment of Bourbon bigotry is documented once again in the scene of the town store, where we are shown dramatically the cruel anti-Negro differential in the upward pricing of commodities to the customer Pinky, when the white merchant discovers that she is a Negro. This is reality caught cold—a piercing comment on the "American way of life."

Finally, on the credit side of the film, there are the positive elements of Pinky's character. Let us examine these in relation to a total realistic view of the film.

In the unfolding struggle for Miss Em's property, there takes place a heavy veiling of true conditions in the South and a busy sowing of illusions in Bourbon justice. In Hollywood's "typical" Southern town, the judge is on the side of justice for the Negro! The court rules in favor of the Negro, and

against the rich white plaintiff. What is more, no mass pressure is brought to bear on the court. In fact, the masses are shown as the counter-pressure. The only ones in the entire drama who are really against Pinky and the Negroes are the poor whites; the class struggle between them and the rich whites seemingly rages over the issue of justice for Pinky: the poor whites are against her; the well-to-do whites are for her. Where but on the Hollywood screen can we get such "insight" into the class alignments of social conflict!

The rose-tinting of bigotry and discrimination, of violence and oppression; the toning down of everything that might be a little "too stark"; the deliberate evasion of the fact of existing mounting legal and extra-legal brutality—these emerge as underlying purposes of the film. In this picture, so high with pretensions of "fairness" to the Negro, the shame of all this is not only ignored; it is sedulously denied by the substitution of happenings no Southland ever saw.

The good white fairy of Hollywood and Wall Street has waved her wand: A white aristocratic woman bequeaths her property to her Negro nurse. The town's outstanding attorney, a former judge, takes Pinky's case, without retainer. A Southern judge rebukes the ranting lawyer who seeks to rob Pinky of her legacy. A Southern white courtroom mob sits and only mutters; even when the court rules in favor of the Negro, the mob does not act. After the court decision, Pinky is prevented by no one from opening her nursery center on the inherited estate, presumably with fairy gold. And, final triumph of the magic wand: The Ku Klux Klan never arrives!

Variety (November 23, 1949) reports that at one sequence, both Negro and white members of the Atlanta audience applauded. (The audience was separated by segregation, of course.) That was the scene in which Pinky won the court fight. How should this be explained? For the Negroes, that scene was the only moment of victory—false and illusory, contrary to all realities, as it was. While for a section of the whites this scene undoubtedly expressed their approval of just decisions for Negroes, for many others it "proved" how nice and how decent Southern white justice "really is."

Indeed, the point about the Atlanta audience opens up for

consideration the calculated effect of the focal courtroom scene on the varying class and social elements among American movie-goers.

Insofar as the film addresses itself to the worker in the audience, the depiction of the lynch-eager mob, shown to be predominantly made up of poor whites, insults the working class and makes it out to be the social villain of the piece. By deliberately screening from view the lynch-law guilt of the "better classes"—the landlords, industrialists, and bankers—the film aims to break down in the worker his self-confidence and self-respect, and to retard the development of his class consciousness.

To the white middle classes the film addresses itself through the courtroom scene somewhat as follows: The workers, clearly, are uncouth and Klux-ish. Your alliance cannot be with them. The "superior" class forces in the film—all the way from landlord to lawyer—they are the ones who battle in the cause of justice, against the white workers and farmers. Here is the road for your alliance!

To the Negro members of the audience the film, through the courtroom scene, seems to say: Your enemy, you can see, is the camp of the poor whites; your protectors and allies are the others, the "best" whites. With these you must work out your destiny. Shun struggle and Negro-white unity. Under the aegis and paternalistic protection of the plantation rulers and their courts of justice, resign yourselves in permanence to your "racial inferiority."

Bourbon justice has been flattered. And Pinky's magnanimous attorney, now that her victory is achieved, solemnly states: "You've got the land, you've got the house, you've got justice; but I doubt if any other interests of this community have been served." This is a dramatic and ideological high point of the film, artistically underscored. Actually, those are the only memorable lines in terms of idea content. In other words, the picture raises the question: Is the whole thing worth while? We white upper-class people rave been very decent and courageous in showing the problem. But in the final analysis, isn't it perhaps all a mistake? And since these words come from the lips of Pinky's white defender,

whose "goodness" has been dramatically established, their calculated impact is indeed cogent.

Who is Pinky?

A key to knowing her is to know the reason for her return home. She has left the North because of her inability to go on in her ambiguous position of concealing her Negro identity from her admirer. She is embittered because she has had to run away. She has not come back to her people. When she walks through the streets, she walks with her head up past the Negro children, past the Negro houses and people.

Yet her very running away has forced her to see herself as belonging to the Negro people. This conflict within her explains her declaration in the arrest scene that she is a Negro. It enters into her refusal to accept her white suitor's "condition" for their marriage. It is a factor in her sharp emotional outburst against serving Miss Em, who has for many years exploited her grandmother. Pinky's initial rebellion against this arrangement which her grandmother seeks to effect is confusedly motivated. On the one hand, there is her resentment at being treated as a Negro and even considered as one despite her light complexion: "I'm as white as you are!" she cries out to Miss Em. On the other hand, her emerging sense of identification with her people, together with her newly acquired sense of professional independence, suggests a socially conscious element in her resistance to the paternalistic summons of the over-bearing old white woman in the Big House.

Aunt Dicey sees the conflict in Pinky and seeks to mold her granddaughter in her own image. She is motivated by the desire to survive and to protect her own. But in her abjectness bred of fear and unconsciousness of any way out, she urges upon Pinky to resolve the conflict within her by kneeling to white "superiority." When, at the outset, she reproves Pinky for her "passing," it is not because she holds that her granddaughter should be conscious of the dignity of her people, but that she should "know her place" as a Negro.

Pinky is a "white" Negro, a Negro who can "pass." She is presented in total effect as the "unusual" Negro. She has trained herself in the mannerisms of the whites. She is al-

ways conscious of the fact that she has acquired a profession, a skill, which is denied to the masses of the young Negro men and women. She is so deliberately contrasted to the other Negro characters as to appear obviously "superior" to them all, and worthy of doing "uplift" work among her people. Because of all this, in Hollywood's alchemized South, a white ruling-class court could not find it out of keeping with its sense of "justice" even to award a verdict to her.

To give the finishing touch to Pinky's "superiority," Hollywood assigned her role to a white woman. Not a Fredi Washington or any one of a score of unquestionably qualified Negro actresses of light complexion was chosen for the leading role of Pinky, but the white actress Jeanne Crain was cast for the part. With all due appreciation for Miss Crain's creditable performance, this fact bears significantly on our evaluation of the film's central character. For, clearly, it would be going "too far" to let an *actual* Negro woman, even in a film pretending to have a Negro heroine, defy, in a white man's court, the white supremacist code of robbery of the Negro's right to inherit; or to let an *actual* Negro woman be seen in a white lover's embrace, even though that love remains, by the taboo of the Hollywood racist code, unconsummated. If a degree of concession must be made in a Negro character, let it at least be made to a white player, says Hollywood. The logic is plain. The logic is cruel.

Pinky is a character capable of resolute decision and sustained, unflinching action. Hollywood cannot permit her initial rebellion against Miss Em to be a basic rebellion. The film, in effect, sets down that act of defiance against her white benefactress-to-be as merely a mistake of impetuous youth. The *New York Times* adds the touching comment: "It also presents a tender aspect of the mutual loyalties between Negro servants and white masters that still exist in the South."

1949!

What solution does *Pinky* offer to the Negro "problem"? It is given by the reformist Negro doctor, representing the Booker T. Washington ideology of gradualism and accommodation to the white rulers. Pinky, let us remember, is

schooled; she is a graduate nurse. She cannot be expected to grow into the stereotyped bandanna-wearing "Mammy." Aunt Dicey needs to be "renovated," cast into a new mold. And so, through the ghetto path of "cultured" acquiescence and segregated "uplift" work, Pinky's potential rebelliousness is channeled away from the course of significant struggle, away from the Negro people's movement directed essentially toward national liberation. She moves "forward" into a segregated existence in which she administers a segregated school—a nice, well-mannered, trim Negro woman who "knows her place"—and is liked and helped by the "best" white folk. Here is the "modern," "streamlined" version of the "Mammy" cliché. Hollywood reverses the old stereotype to create the New Stereotype.

Yes, *Pinky* offers a solution. A reformist, segregationist, paternalistic solution. It is a "solution" which, as in all past Hollywood films, builds on acceptance of the "superiority" of the whites and ends in endorsement of Jim Crow—in this case, "liberal," "benevolent," Social-Democratic Jim Crow.

Pinky, perhaps for fear that the New Stereotype is as yet imperfect for the function of Pinky's role, abounds in hideous stereotypes of the past. Pinky's grandmother, Aunt Dicey, who has accepted her oppressed status and moves about with an Uncle Tom loyalty to the "good" white folk, fulfills the old-style "Mammy" cliché, notwithstanding Ethel Waters' brave attempt to invest the part with some dignity. Another stock-character Negro, Jake, is the "bad" shiftless type, the loose loafer and money-loving schemer, with "comic relief." Then there is Jake's "woman," who "totes a razor." The arrest scene, in which Nina Mae McKinney is made to raise her skirt and the white policeman extracts a razor from the rim of her stocking, is reminiscent of the shameful, vilifying tradition of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*.

How true is the insight of Robert Ellis who wrote in the progressive Negro weekly, *The California Eagle*, on October 20, 1949:

One really must judge harshly here of Darryl Zanuck and Elia Kazan and Philip Dunne and Dudley Nichols (the

producer, director, and writers respectively). For theirs is the main responsibility, and although they had good intentions, and are, I am sure, "liberals"—yet they approached this picture with too much money in their pockets and too much condescension, patronization, paternalism, in their hearts and minds.

And the same incisive critic puts the question to the film makers responsible for this Jim-Crow practice:

Have you ever stepped down from a railroad car and hunted for the colored toilet—gone hungry because there was no colored seat at the counter—walked along the street and felt the hatred and coldness in most people's eyes merely because of color? . . . How can a studio, how can an industry that doesn't employ Negroes as writers, producers, directors, technical directors, cameramen:—how can they write, direct, produce, or film a picture which has sincere and real sensitivity (shall we say artistry) about Negro people?

Who can challenge this bitter truth?

The Innocent Oppressors

In *Lost Boundaries*, a pseudo-documentary, which selects for its study the Negro professional man and his family, the story once again revolves about the theme of "passing."

A Negro medical school graduate, unable to find employment, especially after he is turned down by a Southern Negro hospital because of his light skin, finds no other recourse but to "pass." He and his wife find a haven in a little New Hampshire town, Keene, where he works as a physician for twenty years, the community accepting him and his family as white. He has kept his secret also from his son and daughter. When, upon the outbreak of the war, he applies for a commission in the Navy, an investigation discloses his Negro origin. Rejection, ostracism, and loss of caste swiftly engulf the doctor and his family. But, through the intervention of a "tolerant" white minister, who devotes a Sunday sermon to the subject, the Christian hearts of the townspeople are

opened. The doctor is reinstated in the white community's good graces, he resumes his practice, and, but for the following news item, he and his family seem destined to live happily ever after, as sequel two of the new Hollywood fairy tale comes to a close.

News item: "Dr. Albert Johnston, the Negro doctor whose story is dramatized in the motion picture, *Lost Boundaries*, said last week . . . that the Elliott Community Hospital, which he has served as radiologist since 1940, this year has declined to renew his contract. . . . He would rather, Dr. Johnston said, not believe himself a victim of racial discrimination; yet he can put only this construction on the sequence of events" (*New York Herald Tribune*, October 16, 1949).

They must have been in the wrong church that Sunday morning.

In *Lost Boundaries*, Hollywood has chosen a "superior" Negro for its hero—a non-working class and light-skinned Negro. By central design and through a steady current of ideas, this film seeks to attach false "superiority" to a lighter complexion and to build up a false pride and a false sense of security in petty-bourgeois Negro status. By offering middle-class Negroes, particularly those of a lighter skin, in return for denying their people, the reward of "acceptability" by "good whites," it aims to undermine the solidarity of the Negro people. By inculcating among the Negro masses the petty-bourgeois illusion of "making good" like that infinitesimal handful of Negroes who "succeed," this film serves to place the whole emphasis on individual "achievement" through subservience.

Once again, with *Lost Boundaries*, Hollywood offers a booby-trap gift. The film "exposes discrimination," dramatizes the social disabilities of the Negro physician, makes it the motivating force for his "passing" and—*shunts the blame for it all to his fellow-Negroes!*

In this "crusading" Hollywood movie, the real oppressors are "innocent." The young Negro applicant for an internship is rejected, because of his nearly white complexion, by a Negro hospital in the South. True, white hospitals are shown to discriminate against the Negro doctor. Letters of application sent by his wife are returned with rejections. But never do

you *see* these acts of rejection dramatically presented. Nowhere does the audience actually *see* an example of direct discrimination by whites. *But the audience is made to see in dramatic scenes discrimination by Negroes against the Negro doctor—the only personified act of bigotry in the film.* Thus, the onus of the guilt for his “passing” falls upon the Negro institution. This leads logically to the assumption that one can “hardly blame” whites for discriminating when Negroes themselves discriminate. In fact, *Lost Boundaries* has no tangible villain. The missing villain, the real and essential villain—the white ruling class—is by monopoly dictation unrepresented in the *dramatis personae*, in consequence of which *Lost Boundaries* remains as a whole dramatically unachieved. The only human symbol of oppression pitted against the Negro doctor is the Negro hospital superintendent who rejects the young graduate’s application for an internship.

But what are the facts? *In fact*, discrimination against light-complexioned Negro applicants for internship is not a practice in Negro hospitals; therefore, the very plot of *Lost Boundaries* is a structure of falsehood. *In fact*, the American Medical Association, although it has no constitutional bar to Negro membership, excludes Negro physicians in many areas.* *In fact*, Negro physicians are segregated into the National Medical Association. Yet these shameful facts go unmentioned in what has been called a “documentary” film “indictment” of bigotry in the medical profession. Certainly, this entire sequence, in which one Negro is falsely shown to discriminate against a fellow-Negro, fits “to order” into a film designed as a whole to divide the Negro people against itself and to divert its wrath from the legitimate target: the white ruling-class oppressors. Hollywood thus increases the load of oppression upon the Negro’s shoulders by laying there the unmentionable burden of responsibility for discrimination. Indeed, the teeth of this gift horse are rotten to the roots!

* No physician can join the A.M.A. directly, but is a member on the basis of admission into his county medical society. In 1948 the county medical societies of 17 states, in addition to the District of Columbia, prohibited Negro physicians from joining. An amendment lukewarmly offered by the New York delegates at the 1948 convention of the A.M.A. to abolish this discrimination was defeated.

Among the other distortions of *Lost Boundaries*, one of the least noticed, yet most deserving to be exposed, is the dishonest use of the white Protestant minister. Of course, there are many Protestant churchmen who are far more progressive than the Keene minister of this film; but if he is meant to be representative of Protestant Church policy with regard to the Negroes, then Truth summons us to defend her. The facts about anti-Negro discrimination in the Protestant "Christian" Church are appalling. *The Protestant Church and the Negro*, by Frank Loescher, published in 1948, makes shocking revelations of wholesale discrimination against Negroes in the Protestant Church, facts that indict Jim-Crow policy and practice in congregations and church-controlled educational institutions. The *New York Times* for November 22, 1949, carried this story: "Methodists Study Own Segregation. Youth Group Aims at Reform in the More than Half of its Colleges Barring Negroes." Protestant leaders today are desperate to stop Roman Catholic infiltration amongst Negroes, a phenomenon which results considerably from the "Nordic superiority" attitude and policy of Protestant churches toward the Negro people. This condition the Roman Catholic hierarchy, itself steeped in Jim-Crow guilt, knows well how to exploit. Yet *Lost Boundaries* fosters a myth of Protestant egalitarianism, through its presentation of an upper-class minister who is the good white shepherd of all, Negro and white.

How the Negro character in its mass, or representative, form is conceived in this film becomes glaringly manifest from the vicious, old-style libel-cliché Harlem scene, when the doctor's son, upon learning that he is Negro, decides to go to Harlem to see for himself how his people live. All the evil-looking, evil-sounding, evil-smelling slander-furies set loose from the racist Pandora's box of white supremacy assail him from the moment he sets foot on the pavements of the Negro ghetto. Such continuous scenes of violence, crime, brutality, and depravity, you are made to feel, not only sum up the Harlem Negro community, but issue out of its very "nature." As raw an act of acquittal of white ruling-class criminality as has ever been perpetrated! And who is good in Harlem? The Harlem police! The police, whose brutality to Negroes is a

horrible reality, are depicted as the understanding and humane representatives of Harlem! This monstrous distortion is not mitigated by the film's preposterous representation of the police as exclusively Negro—an outright falsification in the face of the overwhelmingly white police force which is assigned for "duty" to Harlem as to an occupied territory.

In *Lost Boundaries* the logic of blame upon the white ruling class and its state power shades off to the invisible. The Navy's letter of rejection reads: ". . . inability to meet physical requirements." When the minister announces in his sermon that the Navy has opened its door to commissioning Negroes, the audience applauds. But what are the facts? During the war years (from December 7, 1941, to December 31, 1946) there were altogether in the entire United States Navy 60 Negro officers.* In January, 1948, the total number of Negro officers on active duty in the Navy was four.** Thus, the film omits essential facts about the Navy's discriminatory policies. There is happiness in the *Lost Boundaries* church and in the theatre, as the Navy is (by these omissions!) cleared of the guilt of white chauvinist practice.

Most embarrassing, among the many embarrassing problems that beset the makers of this film, must have been the resolution of the romance between the Negro doctor's daughter (played by Susan Douglas) and her white suitor, who had participated in ostracizing the doctor's family. Hollywood's slippery techniques for "resolving" a difficult social conflict are here demonstrated in a transparently contrived scene. After the church sermon which softens the hearts of the townspeople, the young woman's white admirer smiles benignly at her brother, as he passes his pew. The implication might be that he will now resume his courtship. The Negro daughter, emotionally upset by the entire turn in the family's situation, suddenly dashes out of the church—obviously by Hollywood's design to remove any suspicions of an ending in inter-marriage.

In *Lost Boundaries*, we are asked to accept the contradiction of the all-white cast for the main Negro characters—the doctor and his family. Here, as in *Pinky*, the insult is direct: Negro

* *Negro Year Book*, 1947.

** *Negro Year Book*, 1949.

actors may be used for stereotypes or for subordinate parts; but "heroic" roles belong to white players. Not one Negro actor or actress, as the Negro newspaper *Chicago Defender* revealed on March 19, 1949, was even considered for the leading roles, despite the unquestioned availability of highly talented, light-complexioned Negro players.

It is significant that two of the four "Negro interest" films deal with "passing." "This is a season for pictures about Negroes pretending to be white," said the film reviewer of *The New York Sun*. It would be truer to say that this is a season for pictures about whites pretending to be Negroes. It would, of course, be asking too much of a capitalist newspaper to face and reflect the truth that this is a season for gross avoidance of the real, vital issues in the life and struggle of the Negro people, that this is a season for shunting the emphasis on the Negro question to marginal and non-determining areas.

Both *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* lead to the acceptance of the racist brain-coinage of "white supremacy," and both hold out to Negroes—to *certain* Negroes—the prize of "acceptability" at the hands of whites. Between the two films there takes place a division of labor. In *Pinky*, the fatalistic acceptance of the status of Negro "inferiority" leaves for the "exceptional" Negro a "way out" through segregated uplift work under the aegis of Southern white ruling-class paternalism. This explains why *Pinky* was approved by the Atlanta local censor board, which had earlier banned *Lost Boundaries*. In *Pinky*, the Bourbon "master race" finds the "Southern way" of solving the problem. It does not want Negroes to pass for white under any circumstances, because of the integration it suggests. Such a "solution" would be too dangerous for its white supremacy segregation system. Moreover, *Pinky* is propaganda for the theory of the good slavocrat. It embellishes the myth of fine harmony between loving slave and paternalistic master, a propaganda line that is being assiduously fostered in our day by plantation-rule apologists.

Lost Boundaries, the Northern counterpart of this formula, seeks to "soften up" the Negro into acceptance of a fate-ordained white-supremacist America by its pervading idea

that it is a misfortune to be a Negro. However, the almost "white" Negro, provided he is not of the working class, but belongs to the "nice" professions, if he has long atoned with his services to the "best" whites and has to all appearances expunged the Negro from himself—this "tragic mulatto" under the "curse" of being colored may be forgiven and—but for the loss of his post, once the "documentary" is over, and but for his daughter's broken heart—is "accepted" into the white community. Truthfully, such is the milk of human kindness in white, Protestant, upper-class New Englanders, that when it does trickle, the "exceptional" white-seeming and well-groomed middle-class Negro may gratefully look to them for commiseration and forgiveness. As the *New York Herald Tribune* report tells us with regard to the Negro doctor's wife: "Their friends in Keene, Mrs. Johnston recalled, 'came to see us, sent us cards and flowers, and we weren't quite sure whether they were congratulating us or condoling with us.'"

"What," asks a Negro quoted in a metropolitan daily newspaper film review, "has this got to do with the problems of Negroes in the United States? It reminds me of a kid I know who was telling what he learned from *Gentleman's Agreement*. It was: don't be mean to a Jew; he might turn out to be a Christian."

Where is the positive element in *Lost Boundaries*?

It is present in a brief, solitary moment in the drama, in a swift onrush of truth which is halted in its course and forced violently back.

When the doctor's son (poignantly played by Richard Hylton), now knowing himself as a Negro, goes to Harlem in order to be among his people, he is setting forth to do what the supine father failed to do. He goes with a storm of conflict within him—bewilderment in his new recognition of himself as a Negro and resistance to that recognition, fierce resentment against his parent's hypocrisy, and the deep, strong tug of his new-found people. He senses something of the full measure of the sufferings and indignities visited upon the Negro people—his people. And this realization, this first conscious sharing of his people's pain, becomes his first step on the road to liberation.

But there is never more than that moment. The rest is drowned out in waves of tumult and violence, of crime and brutality—the old Hollywood stereotype flashed before you under the title, *HARLEM*. The youth never gets to his people! Through the “considerate” police the son is brought back to his parents. He has been “saved” from his people. . . . No boundary is lost in *Lost Boundaries*—a potential is lost.

“Keepers of Our Conscience”

A theme far from marginal in the United States—the theme of the lynch mob and the frame-up of Negroes—is treated in the next film of this series to be discussed, *Intruder In The Dust*. The film is based on William Faulkner’s novel by that name, which the screenplay by Ben Maddow follows with considerable fidelity, minus the book’s downright racist passages and with its motivating reactionary mystique thinned down. The picture was for the most part filmed in the author’s home town, Oxford, Mississippi, and has thus authentic Southern settings.

The central character, Lucas Beauchamp, an elderly Negro landholder, proud, dignified, strong-willed, who never sirs or steps aside for a white man, is magnificently acted by Juano Hernandez. He towers easily over all the white characters in the drama. Arrested on a false charge of shooting a white man in the back, he disdains to name the white murderer, whose identity is known to him—even in the face of the gathering lynch mob outside the jail. A sixteen-year old white high-school boy, Chick Mallison (Claude Jarman, Junior), whom Beauchamp once rescued out of a creek after a hunting accident, now comes to his aid. His sole clue is Beauchamp’s statement to him, “My pistol is a forty-one Colt and Vinson Gowrie wasn’t shot with no forty-one Colt.” Chick’s efforts to clear Beauchamp are augmented by an eighty-year old woman of the locality and by a Negro lad in the hire of Chick’s uncle. Together they dig up the grave of the murdered man in the hush of night, in a breathless macabre detective hunt, to secure proof of Beauchamp’s innocence. Chick prevails on his lawyer-uncle, John Gavin Stevens (David Brian), a “liberal” white

supremacist, to take Beauchamp's case. The eighty-year old woman holds off the lynch mob by sitting at the entrance to the jail with her darning. The brutal leader of the mob, Crawford Gowrie (Charles Kemper), is exposed and brought to book as his brother's slayer. The patient lynch mob disperses. Lucas Beauchamp has obtained justice in the Bourbon South.

As regards both choice of subject matter and conception of the central character, *Intruder in the Dust* is easily superior to *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*. As against their detour theme of "passing," the subject here projected is central and challenging: lynch law and the frame-up of Negroes. Lynch mentality is under attack in this film. The lynch-mob leader is depicted as a fratricidal and brutal villain. The tug of reluctant friendship which Chick senses for the falsely accused Negro man, whom he admires, proves stronger than his implanted prejudice of "white superiority." Finally, poetic justice is on the side of the framed-up Negro.

Again, unlike the treatment in *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*, the central role is rendered by a Negro player—Juano Hernandez—who is given range for his magnificent talent.

Yet, the over-all impact of *Intruder in the Dust* is an echo of *Pinky*—re-fabricating the myth that the Negro people can depend for their safety on the legal machinery of the lyncho-cratic South. Truly, the art of alchemy is not lost. Hollywood has transformed the basest of metals into pure, shining gold. For this gilded climax is as unreal as the lynch mob that patiently waits and mutters outside the jail, until it disperses peacefully; as unreal as the absence of the Ku Klux Klan from the scene; as unreal as the Southern law enforcers who are only waiting for proof of Beauchamp's innocence; as unreal as the assurance that the white supremacist lawyer will take Beauchamp's case. The whole unreality is, as it were, symbolized by a high-school boy and an eighty-year old woman winning the day against the stacked "justice" of Southern mobs, police, and courts.

But that is not the full measure of twisted logic and imagination which deforms *Intruder in the Dust*. What if the Negro had shot the white man? By inference, since lynch law as such

is not under attack—but only lynch-mindedness in the context of a framed-up charge—Beauchamp could justifiably be lynched by that mob.

Intruder in the Dust, like *Pinky*, “compensates” for the Negro hero by the deliberate injection of a time-worn travesty, in the nocturnal gravedigging scene—the stereotyping, for “comic relief,” of the Negro lad, Aleck, whose eyes are made to roll in the presence of the tombstones. Deliberate—especially because it is not present in the novel. It is thrown in, as it were, “for good measure.”

Lucas Beauchamp himself, achieved in Hernandez’s superb portrayal as a figure of marvelous stature, a man indomitable and possessed of supreme self-command, is, however, made to stand alone among Negroes. Taciturn and crag-like in his defiant strength, he is shown without kinship to fellow-Negroes, and, consequently, without warmth for his own people. This aloneness, this magnified uniqueness implies that all other Negroes are of a totally different mould. Thus, his very cast of heroism is used to undermine confidence in the fighting capacities of the Negro people.

It is not Lucas Beauchamp, but John Gavin Stevens, who is the “overtone” of the film, the voice of Faulkner. Through this middle-class, liberal lawyer, in whom the scales tip but slightly on the side of justice for the Negro, the novel’s underlying philosophy achieves its attenuated expressions on the screen.

In the novel, the middle-class Southern white lawyer states of the Southern whites, in speaking to his nephew:

... we alone in the United States ... are a homogeneous people ... only from homogeneity comes anything of a people or for a people of durable and lasting value—the literature, the art, the science, that minimum of government and police which is the meaning of freedom and liberty. ...

The durable and lasting value coming from that homogeneity is fittingly symbolized in that famous state of “minimum of government and police” where *Intruder in the Dust* was written and filmed, and no less symbolized in the late

Senator and present Congressman from that self-same state of Mississippi—the cultured pursuers of freedom and liberty, Bilbo and Rankin!

The lawyer who carries Faulkner's voice and whose every pore discharges white chauvinism, goes on reciting his thesis: "That's what we are really defending: the privilege to set him [the Negro] free ourselves. . . . But it won't be next Tuesday. Yet people in the North believe it can be compelled even into next Monday by the simple ratification by votes of a printed paragraph. . . ."

Faulkner-Stevens proceeds to defend the privilege to set the Negro free himself (always on the Sunday after next Monday) when the lawyer says to Beauchamp in the jail cell: "Lucas, has it ever occurred to you that if you just said mister to white people and said it like you meant it, you might not be sitting here now?"

And Lucas answers with burning contempt for their timetable for his "liberation": "So I'm to commence now. I can start off by saying mister to the folks that drags me out of here and builds a fire under me."

Faulkner-Stevens endows the South (by which he means the middle-class Southern whites) with a unique moral equipment for its manifest mission. The condition of the Negro in the South, Chick's uncle tells him, is not a matter for interference by Northern, Eastern, or Western "outlanders": "The injustice is ours, the South's. We must expiate and abolish it ourselves, alone and without help nor even (with thanks) advice."

What these words convey in effect is that the "problem" is not an objective one, not a political or social question, not really the problem of the Negro, but a subjective issue, the "moral" problem of the whites, the South's whites fashioned in the "better class" image of Faulkner-Stevens.

And so, the lawyer comments: "We were in trouble, not Lucas." And, in the film's closing scene, as he looks out of his office window upon the departing Beauchamp walking upright and dignified among the pedestrians on the street below, he turns to his nephew and says: "He is the keeper of our conscience." Thus, the film tells us, lynchings are the problem

of a few "right-thinking," educated, "better-class" whites. It is really not the Negroes' problems at all. They just get lynched. But see what it does to the nice white upper-class consciences!

It would, of course, disturb the pattern to represent the lynch mob as anything but a rabble of poor whites. (It is a working-class woman with her baby in her arms who is seen going up to the leader of the mob to ask: "Well, Mr. Gowrie, when you reckon on gettin' started?"). It is true that lynch mobs have often been largely made up of poor whites. But these mobs are organized and guaranteed immunity by the Bourbons who control the local political set-up. The refusal, year in, year out, of the Federal government to enact anti-lynch legislation gives Federal sanction to lynching, and places the government—yes, the sanctimonious "Civil Rights"-championing Truman Administration—side by side with the Southern lynchocrats.

When, therefore, *Intruder in the Dust* seeks to present starkly the mob of poor whites as the camp of the lynchers, and the judicial arm of the Government as the "protector" of the Negro against the poor whites, it is shielding the villain of the drama—the state power of the class which enforces "white supremacy" and organizes and protects lynch mobs. Faulkner-Stevens says of the crowd of poor whites, following its voluntary dispersal: "They were running from themselves." But the lawyer says assuringly, everything will always be all right "as long as one of us doesn't run."

And so, the salvation of the Negro people lies in the hope that there will always be a sixteen-year-old white schoolboy geared to middle-class "conscience" or an eighty-year-old white spinster who believes in "doing what is right" or a white sheriff with a "strong sense of duty" (assuming that he will always be played by Will Geer)—or even only one of these. For does not the lawyer assure us in the novel—"three were enough last Sunday night, even one can be enough."

What answer can the film give to the question of the *Daily Compass* reviewer Seymour Peck, who wrote in his column of November 23, 1949: "We are glad Lucas has been saved from lynching, but we remember the many who were not saved. We wonder: where were the consciences of white men

when they died? The lynch mob disperses and goes home but we have the feeling that they will be back again sometime for some other victim. Will their consciences stop them?"

It has been stated by one critic on the Left that *Intruder in the Dust* is in the tradition of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*. Yes, if by this tradition is meant the basic strategy of the bourgeois-bourbon enslavement of the film medium to promote the white "master race" ideology and to hold back the labor-Negro alliance and the Negro people's movement for national liberation. But let us not blur that which is new in a film presenting a Negro as the central character, the hero of the drama, as against films that were landmarks of racist viciousness, an exaltation of the Southern slaveholders and a hideous vilification of the Negro people, a rationale for lynchings and a direction for the Klan to ride. The strategy of the enemy cannot be fought unless it is recognized and combatted in its tactical manifestations.

Intruder in the Dust manifests, *par excellence*, the fact that Hollywood and Wall Street are keenly conscious of the need today for subtler methods to meet and throw back the rising movement of the Negro people and the developing Negro-white unity. Reaction today feels compelled to develop film-making methods which seemingly deal with the Negro question, but in reality divert the onlooker from it. This would seem to put a weapon in the people's hand, but in reality it is a tactic for disarming. It does not present the Negro in the calumnious stereotype of brute or sub-human. It seems to equip us with a fighting film against discrimination and against lynching, but in actuality, it weakens the fight.

Intruder in the Dust "tackles" the issue of lynching, only to lull us into the belief that lynchings are foiled in the South, with the aiding arm of the law. It "tackles" the issue of the frame-up of Negroes, only to lead us to conclude that the victim is cleared and goes forth free and unmolested. It gives to the Negro white "allies," only to bring him to believe that he needs no mass allies, since there will always be the token "one who will not run." It "tackles," at last it would seem, the Negro question, only to have us conclude that there is no

Negro question—that the problem of the Negro is really the problem of the white man, his “moral” problem.

Hollywood's False Equation

Most important, because it comes closest to being “our film” and yet in a sense is furthest removed from it, is *Home of the Brave*, the first picture of the series. It is not a film about “passing” or any other fringe problem. Nor is it a film about white middle-class conscience-saving. This seemingly realistic film of the Negro on the battle-field is the most meaningful American picture emanating from the war.

The story is well known. *Home of the Brave* was adapted from Arthur Laurents's stage play of that name, in which the protagonist was a Jewish soldier. In the film, a Negro soldier named Moss is the hero. Together with a group of four white G.I.'s, Moss goes on a dangerous reconnoitering mission to a Japanese-held Pacific island, in the course of which he encounters anti-Negro prejudice, mainly on the part of one of the men, T. J., a “white supremacy” bigot who was a successful executive in civilian life. At a climactic moment in the physical action, Moss' white friend Finch, his intimate chum since school days, quarrels with him, is about to utter an anti-Negro epithet, but checks himself, almost immediately before he is fatally wounded by a sniper's bullet. Before his death he asks Moss to forgive him. The Negro soldier is torn away from his dying mate in the jungle by the press of military duty. Finch's death produces in Moss a psychological shock and results in the paralysis of his legs. Later, in a field hospital, an Army psychiatrist causes him to re-live his experiences on the island in flashbacks. According to the psychiatrist, his paralysis was caused by a guilt-feeling—his experience of happiness at having remained alive, even though his chum had been killed; a guilt-feeling that has been complicated by his conviction, as a Negro, that his subjection to that mental torment manifests the fact that he is different from the whites. The problem before him, the psychiatrist tells him, is to adjust himself to reality through realizing that his trouble is “sensitvity” and that he is not different; with this realization, his problem will

be solved, his adjustment made. By the therapy of shocking his patient into an angry response to an anti-Negro insult, the psychiatrist brings Moss to regain the use of his legs.

In the soldier Moss, vibrantly portrayed by the young Negro actor, James Edwards, more than in the protagonists of the succeeding three films of this cycle (save for certain aspects of Lucas Beauchamp), the screen depiction of the Negro represents a departure from the Hollywood pattern. For, in this Negro leading character, we have not only a self-respecting and dignified person, prepossessing, intelligent; not only a man devoted as friend and as patriot, and unflinching before danger; but a son of the common people, with their speech and their warm-heartedness. We have in this hero, not a middle-class professional, or a landowner, but a regular G.I., thrown into a common situation with fellow-G.I.'s in a drama of real conflict, roughing it with them, facing danger and death with them, proving himself—in the final balance sheet—equal to, if not better than, the next man, who happens to be white.

What elevates this film *qualitatively*, in a political sense, above the others is its projection, even though distortedly, of the theme of equality for the Negro. The theme of none of the other three films, as we have seen, pierces the circumference of "white superiority." *Home of the Brave* is the first Hollywood film to attempt full-length treatment of the thesis of anti-Jim Crow and of Negro-white fraternity—a fact that is noteworthy quite apart from the question of its treatment of that central idea.

Let us now see the film's unfolding of the thesis of Negro-white equality, which occurs most explicitly in the scene between the psychiatrist and the Negro soldier:

Doctor: "Peter, *every soldier in this world* who sees a buddy get shot has that one moment when he feels glad. Yes, Pete, every single one. Because deep down underneath he thinks: I'm glad it wasn't me. I'm glad I'm still alive. . . . You thought you were glad because Finch was going to make a crack about your being a Negro. Maybe later you were glad because of that. But at that moment you were glad it wasn't *you* who was shot. You were glad *you*

were still alive. . . . You see the whole point of this, Peter? You've been thinking you had some special kind of guilt. But you've got to realize something. You're the same as anybody else. You're no different, boy, no different, at all.

Moss: I'm Colored.

Doctor: There—that sensitivity—that's the disease you've got. It was there before anything happened on that island. It started way back. . . . It's a legacy. A hundred and fifty years of slavery and second-class citizenship, of being different. You had that feeling of difference pounded into you when you were a child—and being a child you turned it into a feeling of guilt. You've always had that guilt inside you—that's why it was so easy for you to feel guilty about Finch. . . . The very same people who make the cracks—who try to make you feel different—do it because deep down underneath they're insecure and unhappy, too. They need a scapegoat—somebody they can despise so they can feel strong. Believe me, they need help as much as you do—maybe more.

Before proceeding to examine the thesis itself, we need to ponder the very raising of the question of Negro-white equality through the "no different" formula presented in this film. For adherents of Marxism-Leninism, who know the Negro masses to be subjected to double oppression—class and national—the question suggests itself: Is not the projection of such a thesis on the screen, by its concealment of the special oppression of the Negro people, a reactionary step leading away from any program of concrete struggle for Negro rights?

This critical emphasis marked some of the reviews of the film in a section of the Left press. In a measure, those reviews contributed to counteracting the outright endorsement of the film's thesis in bourgeois, reformist, and Social-Democratic publications, as well as tendencies in that direction on the part of certain other Left commentators. However, the answer to the question just posed was presented in those Left reviews in an over-simplified and sectarian manner. The answer did not indicate sufficient attention to what is new in the fact that the pressure of the Negro people's movement for equality is forcing its way upon the Hollywood screen. Thus, while those reviews correctly rejected the film's misleading thesis of "no different," they also tended to overlook the significance

of the fact that a Hollywood film had been compelled to raise, however inadequately, the question of Negro equality.

To develop this point but a little. When, for example, the Negro newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* presents the view (in an article by Marjorie McKenzie, October 29, 1949) that "*Home of the Brave* is a healthier, more useful movie than *Pinky* because . . . in it a Negro is helped to understand himself in relation to white people as being not different," what is the task of the Communist film critic? He is called upon to shed the clear light of Marxism-Leninism on the decidedly positive intention of the statement. For on the Hollywood screen, which for half a century has depicted the Negro as "less than the white man," and as "less than human," we witness a drama in which the *idea* is presented that the Negro is not different from the white man.

It stands to reason that the Marxist critic must point out the inadequacy of the thesis as presented in *Home of the Brave*. He must show that the formula of "no different" avoids the objective reality of the differentiated status of the oppressed Negro people—the status of national oppression. It is a status rooted in the Black Belt, where the subject Negro majority population, in struggling for freedom, is struggling for full equality as a nation. The Marxist critic must show, further, that the struggle for equal rights for the Negro people throughout the country is interconnected with the struggle of the subject Negro nation in the Black Belt—that it is an anti-imperialist struggle. Thus he can make evident the common cause of all—Negro and white—who are struggling against the same imperialism with its program of war and fascism. Thus, further, he can expose those who demagogically resort to the argument of "no different" in order to reject the fight for the special demands of the Negro people, the fight that is the road to Negro equality.

But *Home of the Brave*, instead of presenting the Negro question as grounded in economic and political reality, requiring a political solution through the collective liberation movement of the Negro people, reduces it to an abstract, psychic, moral issue, to a personalized problem of adaptation to the status quo.

If in *Intruder in the Dust* the Negro's problem is really not his problem but that of the white man's conscience, in *Home of the Brave* it is the Negro's problem—but, in the ultimate sense, only because he himself creates it. It is his problem, subjectively, in terms of his "guilt-feeling," his "sensitivity." True, we have in the film an objective, realistic situation of white chauvinist attitudes in the American army, in a war that is officially being fought against the fascist Axis. Moreover, the villain of the piece is the Negro-baiter, and the Negro protagonist is given allies from among his white fellow-soldiers. There is conflict, there are alignments of forces, there is an outcome in social symbols. But all this objectivity and all this reality fade in the light of the pervading subjective idealist thesis that the problem is ultimately in the mental attitude of the Negro soldier, on the one hand, and of his white tormentors, on the other—in his feeling of guilt, because he considers himself different, and in their feeling of insecurity which begets in them the need of a scapegoat.

In the deeper sense, therefore, the film tells us that there is no Negro question, or rather none which has objective existence. The issue is inside the Negro himself. The film shifts the emphasis from American capitalist society, from the reactionary politics of the white ruling class, to a problem that resides in no state of oppression, except in his state of self-oppression. The liberation to be sought is thus essentially liberation from his self-inflicted guilt-feeling. There is no Negro people; there are only Negro people—15,000,000 atomized individuals. Hence, there is no cause, no goal, no program of struggle for the Negro people. Equality is at hand—if only each individual Negro will remove the roadblock of his "oversensitivity."

There has been criticism of the film-makers for thwarting the Negro hero's dramatic affirmation in the scene where the bigot T.J. baits him. He is robbed of the high moment of striking the chauvinist villain. Yet, viewed in the light of the film's thesis, this omission is in actuality no dramatic hedging of the hero; it is his "fulfillment." By definition of the thesis, he *cannot* fight—his struggle must be with himself, with the "guilt-feeling" deep within himself.

Not only can he not fight the Negro-baiter, but he must try to understand that "deep down underneath" T.J. and other white supremacists like him, are "insecure and unhappy, too," that they need help as much as he himself does—"maybe more." In the great moment when life—on the stage or off—summons the baited and oppressed to self-affirmation through struggle, through striking back, the Negro soldier Moss, in this film, can only give vent to his resentment by slumping and burying his head in his hands. It is a practice that is in unison with the "theory" of *Home of the Brave*.

From the psychoanalytic thesis of the "equal unhappiness" of the racist and his victim proceeds the film's false approach to the question of Negro and white equality. We have seen how this reactionary Freudian ideology impairs the fighting spirit of the Negro protagonist. But this equation of negatives—"guilt-feeling" and "insecurity"—is extended in the film to all whites; it becomes the basis also of the Negro-white friendship and alliance.

Let us remember the psychiatrist's speech to Moss: ". . . every soldier in this world who sees a buddy get shot has that one moment when he feels glad. . . . You're the same as anybody else. You're no different. . . ." Therapeutic intent notwithstanding, this idea is offered in the dramatic context of the film as a world outlook for the Negro soldier: his "road" to equality. Essentially, the film says that the basis for equality or alliance of Negroes and whites is their common human weakness. "Coward, take my coward's hand" is a line of verse that runs like a refrain through the film. It is spoken at the *finale* between Moss and the white sergeant Mingo, who lost his arm in battle, as they go off together to open a bar-restaurant in partnership.

The climactic point in the equation of "negatives" comes a little before, when Mingo, proposing the alliance, seeks to reassure his hesitant Negro friend that they have something "in common." He lifts his empty sleeve and says: "There's nothing in this sleeve but air, kiddo." And so, we have the racist equation of "equal unhappiness": a man of dark skin = a white man with one arm!

Not of such stuff is the equality for which the Negro people

is today struggling. The alliance of Negro and white is not a pooling of common weakness, but a compounding of *common strength*. It is an alliance of common resoluteness and common faith and confidence. To the extent that the Negro people's movement and the labor movement become conscious of the strength, present and historic, in themselves and in each other, will the alliance of the working class and the Negro people, which is basic to the entire Negro-white alliance, grow and be strengthened.

Nor is the issue a question of Negro "guilt-feeling" and white man's sense of "insecurity"; it is not a relationship of two states of mind. It is an objectively existing relationship of oppressed and oppressor. The fact that the oppressed nation is of a color different from that of the oppressor nation has been converted by the white ruling class and its chauvinist ideologues with their "scientific" and "sociological" clap-trap into a "justification" of the racist thesis of white supremacy. But, as true science shows, the fact that the subject nation is Negro and the dominating nation white, has its cause, not in "human nature," but in history. The "colored" Japanese, not only the white Britons, French, Dutch, and Americans, oppressed the Asian peoples. The white Irish came under the imperial heel of the same white Britons that have trod down the "colored" Indians, Chinese, Burmese, Malaysians, and South Africans. And the white Germans who oppressed the "colored" East Africans brought under their heel the white Europeans of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, Norway, and other nations.

It is a question of national oppression; it is an issue of national liberation. In the struggle for national liberation the Negro people will forge its vital alliance with the oppressed white masses and will achieve the basis for real equality.

Adding Up the Score

Home of the Brave, Lost Boundaries, Pinky, Intruder in the Dust must be labelled clearly. Taken together, they constitute a new cycle of films that seem to arm, but actually attempt to disarm, the Negro people's movement; that seem to pro-

mote the Negro-and-white alliance, but actually attempt to set divisions between Negro and white. They are films that, in the guise of "dignity," introduce a New Stereotype—a continuation of the Uncle Tom tradition, in "modern" dress, while retaining the old stereotypes. They are films that attempt to split the Negro people's solidarity with promises of "rewards" from the "best" whites—"justice" and "positions" for light-skinned, in distinction from dark-skinned, Negroes; "respectability" and "social station" for Negro middle-class professionals, in distinction from working-class Negroes. They are films that seek to prevent the Negro workers from advancing to leadership in the Negro people's liberation movement.

They are films that through distortion and dramatic misrepresentation of fact attempt to shift the blame for Negro oppression to the Negro people themselves. They are films that attempt to inspire in the Negro people trust in their worst enemy—the white ruling class, by portraying that class as the Negro's benefactor and legal protector, while arousing in them mistrust, fear, and hatred against the white working people, who are depicted as the would-be lynchers, as the camp of the lynchers. They are films that seek to make the Negro feel beholden to the white free-enterprisers and to be on his best behavior in expectation of "gradual" emancipation. They are films that attempt to deprive the Negro people of self-confidence in its capacity to struggle, to divert Negroes from collective, mass action, from the Negro people's movement, into individual grapplings with oppression, into efforts at personal "adjustment." They are films that attempt to deny the objective existence of the Negro question, by making lynch-law appear a "moral" problem of the "better class" whites, by making Negro-baiting appear a matter of the Negro's "sensitivity" due to "guilt feeling" and of his baiter's "unhappiness" and sense of "insecurity." They are films that seek to weaken the Negro people's understanding of the source and nature of their oppression, by means of the Social-Democratic thesis of "no difference" which leaves the Negro masses defenseless against their double oppression, class oppression and national oppression. Apart from positive features already discussed, these films aim to undermine the Negro people's struggle for

national liberation from the "master race" domination of landlords, industrialists, and bankers, and to blunt any struggle against the monopolists and their war-and-fascism program.

In terms of the white audiences, similarly, this cycle of films expresses a reactionary ideology. In their total impact, these films would have the white masses believe that the ruling class is concerned over the Negro people's plight, that it seeks to promote their welfare, is democratically minded toward them, and aims to do away with lynchings and discrimination. Implicit in such propaganda, insofar as it is directed to white workers and progressives, is the negation of the mutually vital need for the alliance between the working class and the Negro people's liberation movement. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Social-Democratic, labor-reformist, and liberal publications joined with the open bourgeois press in acclaiming these films. They said in effect: Leave it to the ruling class, leave it to the Truman government, leave it to the courts, leave it to the churches, leave it to the moral sense of the "right-thinking," "better-class" whites.

This film cycle in an over-all sense leaves to the white masses the ideological residue that the Negro must "know his place," and that whatever rights need to be accorded him must be given within the framework of that idea. The white spectator is taught to regard the Negro people as "unfortunate" beings, toward whom the whites should exercise "tolerance" and to whom they should give moral "hand-outs." By means of this patronizing, white chauvinist "morality," such films seek to perpetuate the myth of Negro "inferiority" and to beguile the white masses with the fiction of "white superiority"—that deliberately- and artificially-fostered ideology from which only the white rulers profit.

These films, moreover, in presenting the poor white masses as the lynchers, attempt to make *them* appear responsible for the Jim-Crow segregation and oppression of the Negro people, to make *them* appear the breeders of white chauvinism. Thus, white chauvinism, the ideological weapon with which imperialism buttresses its national oppression of the Negro people, is made to appear "inherent" in the white masses, who are victims of the same ruling class. Of course, the poison of chau-

vinism infiltrates the ranks of the masses of the oppressor nation; and to the extent that they fail to join in fighting alliance with the subject nation, they bear an onus for the national oppression and for the pernicious chauvinist ideology. But the chauvinism which these white masses manifest is alien to their interests and to their class morality, and has to be purged from their midst. Indeed, the very idea that chauvinism is inherent is itself chauvinist. Such films serve their purpose as brakes on joint mass action of Negroes and whites. They have the effect of disorienting the white masses from the clear view of their responsibilities—inseparable from their own interests—to the oppressed Negro people. To that extent, they retard the development of the broad people's unity so vitally necessary in today's grim struggle against war and fascism, so vitally necessary for the national liberation of the Negro people and for the achievement of Socialism.

These "Negro interest" films appear at the very time when the Negro people are being subjected to increasing discrimination and oppression. The falsity of these films in artistic terms is in measure to their political service to réaction. They distort the reality of the Negro people's struggle, which is concerned with jobs, housing, education, equal rights, and peace.

American imperialism aims with its Truman "New Look" demagoguery to convince the Negro people in upsurge that their fate is safely in the hands of the "best" white folk, that their social condition is every day in every way getting better and better, and that therefore they should tolerate "occasional" Georgia lynchings or Harlem police shootings, and pay no heed to the "trouble-making" Paul Robesons and Ben Davises. This propaganda tries to conceal the persistent failure—chargeable to both parties of capitalism—to establish a Fair Employment Practices Commission, to enact anti-poll tax and anti-lynching legislation, to outlaw Jim Crow in the armed forces, and to pass a Federal civil rights measure. It puts a veil over the systematic exclusion of Negro workers from positions in basic industries limitedly acquired in war time, through wholesale firings, down-grading on the jobs, and restriction of job openings to the hardest and most menial work. This gen-

eral condition is reflected in the sharp rise of Negro unemployment: In New York, as of 1949, Negroes constituted about 20 percent of all unemployed, whereas their population percentage (according to data from the preliminary census of 1950) is 9.5 per cent; in Chicago and Toledo, nearly half of the registered unemployed were Negroes.* In city after city, the majority of the unemployed Negro workers have already consumed their unemployment insurance and are at the mercy of inadequate and precarious relief dispensations.

Truman's showy "civil rights" bunting would cover up the shocking living conditions in Negro ghetto communities—such appalling facts as that rentals in Harlem's dilapidated, rat-infested, stifling tenements consume 45 percent of the family income, as against 20 percent in the rest of Manhattan; that Harlem's maternal death rate is double that of the rest of New York City's and its tuberculosis rate quadruple.**

And in the field of education the President's "civil rights" demagoguery would drown out the growing protests against the quota system for Negro students in colleges, and against the appalling segregation in public schools legally authorized in twenty-one states and the District of Columbia, and permitted in eleven others.*** In the sphere of the arts and professions the same demagoguery would silence indignation against the notorious discriminatory practices, as shockingly exposed in March, 1947, at the conference of the Cultural Division of the former National Negro Congress.**** In the sphere alone of our present survey, the film industry, we must take sharp note of the fact that Hollywood does not employ a single Negro writer, director, sound man, cameraman, or other technician. And, as we have seen in regard to the very films that are offered as an earnest of a "new approach" to the

* *The Economic Crisis and the Cold War*, edited by James S. Allen and Doxey Wilkerson, New Century Publishers, New York, 1949, p. 70.

** See *Look* magazine's article "Harlem . . . New York's Tinder Box" (December 6, 1949), by its staff writer, Lewis W. Gillenson.

*** See the article, "Civil Rights and Minorities," by Paul Hartman and Morton Puner, *New Republic*, January 30, 1950.

**** For some of the facts relating to discrimination against Negro artists and workers in the cultural media, see *Culture in a Changing World*, by V. J. Jerome, New Century Publishers, 1947, pp. 31-33.

Negro people, in two of the four pictures in the cycle the major Negro characters were denied to Negro actors.

In the face of these glaring facts, Mrs. Roosevelt writes:

Things have been improving in the economic field and in education for the colored people. I would also say in the field of arts that there is an increasing opportunity for them to gain recognition on an equal basis. But if Mr. Robeson succeeds in labelling his race as a group as Communists, many of these gains will be lost, I am afraid, in the future (*New York World-Telegram*, November 3, 1949).

In plain words, the Negro people must be made to understand: either you line up on the political side the "best" white people choose for you, or else—. This is the same Mrs. Roosevelt, chairman of the U.N. Human Rights Commission which was castigated in a group petition prepared by the eminent Negro scholar Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois: "We charge that the Human Rights Commission under Eleanor Roosevelt, its chairman . . . have consistently and deliberately ignored scientific procedure and just treatment to the hurt and hounded of the world"*

Imperialism draws willing aides for its chauvinist propaganda from the reactionary Social-Democrats and reformist labor leaders, as well as from Negro bourgeois nationalist leaders. Their role in the mass organizations of the Negro people and among Negro trade unionists is to undermine the self-confidence and arrest the militant advance of the Negro people's movement, and, above all, to thwart the historical alliance of that movement with the American working class. In the concrete terms of today, their assistance to imperialism is aimed at "selling" Wall Street's war program to the Negro masses.

In this light, we can perhaps more readily understand the policy of "elevating" certain upper-stratum Negro leaders which serves to give the impression of full integration of the Negro people in American life. American imperialism cultivates in this period a tissue-thin top layer of Negro aristocracy,

* *National Guardian*, December 5, 1949.

while it intensifies white ruling-class violence and terror, both legal and extra-legal. This new tactic is designed to reinforce its ideological transmission belt among the Negro people and to bring false comfort to the angry Negro masses in order to blind them with illusions and blunt their capacity for struggle, in order to break their resistance to the despoilers and warmongers.

The sundry misleaders of the Negro people constitute a grave threat to the present status and future development of its liberation movement. For it should be clear that the movement of the Negro people cannot go forward today unless it marches shoulder to shoulder with the world anti-imperialist front of struggle for peace and national freedom. By the same logic of historical necessity, the peace front in the United States today cannot advance unless it makes the fight for Negro rights an organic part of its struggle.

A Class Approach

These conclusions as regards the cycle of "Negro interest" films derive, in a basic sense, from the Marxist conception of the ideological function of the film medium in class society.

The cinema is often conceived as something that is inherently endowed with a "mission" and is therefore necessarily progressive. Because of its mass impact, the film has sometimes been invested with mysterious values that enable it to transcend class relations and conflicts, that make it essentially "humanist" and of the "folk." The former head of the U.N. documentary film unit, Jean Benoit-Levy, asserts that "the very mission of the cinema is to make men realize that they are brethren."* Although progressive in intent, such a statement contributes to an unreal, abstract, "above-class" approach to the medium. In the United States even some critics who write presumably as Marxists have fallen into the error of viewing the motion picture medium as inherently a peo-

* Jean Benoit-Levy, "The Mission of the Cinema," *The Penguin Film Review*, London and New York, No. 4, 1947, pp. 10-11.

ple's art or as an art form that must develop by its own inner laws into a progressive cultural weapon.

Thus, a film reviewer in the *Daily People's World* of San Francisco writes: "Critics on the left have reacted subjectively, have developed a scornfully immature attitude toward the cinema, for the most part seeing Hollywood only as a corrupt institution, the source of nightmares of decadence and ideas of reaction."

He is lead on by this reasoning to criticize Maxim Gorky for his forecast, in 1896, of the inevitable corruption of the film by capitalism. That year, after viewing in Paris the first publicly exhibited film, Gorky said:

Rather than serve science and aid in the perfection of man, it will serve the Nizhni Novgorod Fair and help to popularize debauchery. . . . There is nothing in the world so great and beautiful but that man can vulgarize and dishonor it. And even in the clouds, where formerly ideals and dreams dwelt, they now want to print advertisements—for improved toilets, I suppose.

This remarkable prediction of the film under capitalism is for our critic "Gorky's pessimistic prophecy." He writes: "Gorky, in 1896, could not yet see the possibility of the film's development as a creative weapon in the hands of the artist."*

The arrogance of this statement is matched only by its absurdity. Where amid the constant rubbish ground out by the bourgeois film-mills of Hollywood is there evidence today of "a creative weapon in the hands of the artist"? Weapon?—yes! But it is neither creative nor in the hands of the artist. It is destructive and in the hands of the monopolists. It is a weapon used against truth, against culture, against liberty, against peace, against man—against artists like the Hollywood Ten.

This in no sense means that progressive screen artists should not, in their various creative spheres and through organization, struggle against the reactionary, war-mongering program

* Matthais Pierce, "On Criticism and the Film," *Daily People's World*, June 30, 1949.

of the film monopolies. They must, however, combat all above-class conceptions of the film medium, all illusions about that happy state of developing free creativeness for the Hollywood artist in the atomic year of 1950 which poor Gorky back in 1896 was unable to pre-appreciate!

The fallacy in the idealization of the cinema derives from confusing the quantitative magnitude of this mass medium, which influences millions, with the quality of a people's art. When Lenin said after the October Revolution that "of all the arts, the most important for us is the film," he had reference to its value for socialist construction. And the epic grandeur of the Soviet film art has richly confirmed Lenin's emphasis on this great cultural medium. Under capitalism, however, the film serves monopoly, not only as a source of colossal profit, but as one of its most potent ideological weapons to master the minds of millions. How Gorky's prophecy has been confirmed is stated in the report of M. Suslov to the November, 1949, meeting of the Communist Information Bureau, which refers to the role of American films in the imperialist preparations for war:

One of the important means of ideological preparation in the "Americanized" countries is the flooding of these countries with American crime literature and Hollywood films, in which gangsters, murderers, sadists, corrupters, bigots and hypocrites invariably appear as the main heroes. Such "art" and "literature" poison and stupefy both reader and spectator.

The conception that in its first phase, that of small capital investment, the commercial film reflected the viewpoint of the nickelodeon audiences is founded on error. Such a claim, frequently encountered, is theoretically and historically false. It would lead us to set apart the film productions in the stated period of American bourgeois society from the sphere of bourgeois ideology, from the ideological superstructure of the existing social order. And, here, it should be remembered that the question of ideology in "that then small investment business" was basically determined by the fact that the United

States had entered the monopoly stage of capitalism. A clear analysis of the social content of those films will show how they expressed the false values of capitalist society. Touchingly promoted in the trade press of that time as recalling "scenes that are dear to the poorest patrons of these shows" and as showing "the disastrous effect of wrong-doing," those pictures in no way directed the mind of the poorest patrons, the wage-earners, to an understanding of the *essential* meaning either of the wrong-doing or of its disastrous effect. On the contrary, the social evils were not traced to their source—the system of capitalist exploitation and oppression, which engenders them. The vaunted "pro-labor" films did not conduce to labor's self-recognition as a "class in itself . . . and for itself" (Engels), but rather to pity for the "lot" of the poor (*The Eviction*), to sentimental commiseration for the individual tragedies of the "underprivileged" (*A River Tragedy*), to "forgiveness" for their crimes begotten of dire want (*A Desperate Encounter*), and to "better understanding" between master and worker (*Sunday With the Boss*).

The misconception of reality which marks the idealization of the early film is traceable to the petty-bourgeois approach to the question of monopoly capitalism. For the class-conscious proletarian, the source of the social evils lies in *capitalism*, of which monopoly is a historic and irreversible stage. This high degree of concentration and centralization of the means of production can be transformed basically, not through moving backward to freely competitive capitalism, but only through moving forward to the establishment of socialism. In the mind of the petty bourgeois, the oppression at the hands of monopoly capital lies solely in the *monopoly* element of the concept "monopoly capitalism," which element, were it only "withdrawn," would leave, as by magic, a well-functioning capitalist system (essentially, the reactionary Utopia of Henry Wallace).

Now, of course, the anti-monopoly sentiments and movements represent a progressive force with which the working class must ally itself, in common struggle. Indeed, these sentiments and movements provide that identity of interest which is the precondition for the alliance of the non-proletarian anti-

monopoly forces with the proletarian anti-monopoly forces. However, it must always be borne in mind that, unless checked, the tendency of the former is to abstract monopoly into something separate and apart from capitalism. The experience of the past half century demonstrates that any critique of monopoly in abstraction leads in practice to helplessness before the onslaughts of capitalism, if not to the defense of capitalism.

Clearly, only those who do not extend their anti-monopoly position to the struggle against capitalism as such can present the pre-Big Business beginnings of the capitalist film industry in the United States as a "people's art," as "an art close to the people," as a "reflection of the viewpoint of the audience."

To conclude this point, we should note certain special circumstances which were favorable to the emergence during that early period of films with some progressive features. It should be understood that at that time the process of trustification of film production and exhibition had not yet been completed, and therefore the possibilities for achieving progressive features—never basic—in theme and treatment obtained to a certain extent.

It should be borne in mind, in this connection, that the first attempt in 1909 by the "Motion Picture Patents Company" trust, to monopolize production and distribution of films failed because of the resistance of large theatre operators and independent producers. Indeed, it was during this period (around 1913) that Hollywood was established as a counterpoise to the older Eastern monopolists, and for a few years the battle between the rival groups slowed down the process of trustification and allowed a certain, formal, creative independence to find hesitant expressions. For the older Eastern trust tried to halt any advance beyond the cheaply made one-reeler, while Hollywood was forced by its efforts to win first a foothold, and then complete victory, to experiment with longer "feature" films under the influence of the European art film. But by 1914 the older trust had been decisively defeated. Long financially involved in the developing film industry, Wall Street now threw its weight fully behind the hegemony of the new Hollywood producers, who proceeded

to take over control of distribution as well as production, and brought forth the strangling monopoly we know as Hollywood today.

Were the film an inherently progressive art, as its special pleaders claim, it would not have appropriated, at the very outset, the stock attitudes toward the Negro that were reflected ad nauseam in the earlier entertainment media which served the ruling class. It would have given us truthful and eloquent portrayals of Negro life and Negro struggles. It would have given us Nat Turners and Sojourner Truths instead of "Rastuses" and "Sambos." It would have afforded an ever-expanding medium for Negro talent.

It did none of these things, because it could not transcend the limitations of its class controls. It took over all the slanderous attitudes of its forerunners in the bourgeois amusement field—the minstrel show, the garish and buffoon vaudeville performances with their inevitable "blackface" comedians, the ludicrous stories portraying Negroes as innately and naively "children." It made hardly a token effort to utilize Negro talent, for many years assigning Negro parts to white players—parts that were uniformly stereotyped and offensive. And only such humiliating roles were open to the severely limited number of Negro players whom Hollywood in the course of time engaged.*

Artists of the stature of Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, and Canada Lee expressed the burning resentment of their people toward the Hollywood racist pattern by spurning roles that maligned the Negro. The motion picture monopolists, allowing no other characterization, made it impossible for self-respecting Negro actors to manifest their talents honestly on the screen. Moreover, this oppressive policy denied to the Negro actor his right as an artist to portray characters without regard to color line—Hamlet as well as Othello. It denied to him the heritage of world culture, even the full treasure of our common language.

* A rare—almost lone—exception that comes to mind is the supporting role of the dignified and courageous Negro doctor in the screen version of Sinclair Lewis' *Arrowsmith* (1932), admirably played by the Negro actor, Clarence Brooks.

The commercial film did more than appropriate stock attitudes and stock racial characterizations. It multiplied a thousandfold the audiences for racism presented as "entertainment." It enabled the whole theme of "white supremacy" to be presented with new subtleties and a whole new range of major deceptions that were not possible in older media. It gave the white ruling class new techniques of production and new methods of advertising to justify its reactionary chauvinist mythology.

What Is to Be Done?

While Marxists seek to dispel any illusions as regards the "democratization" of Hollywood's output under capitalism, they warn against any fatalistic notion of "waiting for socialism" to "take care" of the matter. Not because socialism in the United States will not solve the Negro question, in life and in the arts, as socialism has solved the national question in the U.S.S.R., but because to them who wait for it, but do not struggle for it, socialism will never come.

We must fight against white chauvinism in film content—its every manifestation, not only the obvious stereotypes—and against discrimination in the employment and assignments of Negro film artists and workers. The two struggles are one. They must be intensified, broadened, extended, inter-linked.

The economic and political struggles on these issues must be accompanied by a sharp fight against the anti-Negro "theories" used to justify the national oppression of the Negro people and its reflection in the arts. Only by recognizing and acting on the basis of this interconnection shall we be able effectively to fight white chauvinism in practice and ideology.

It is a false notion that the battle for honest, realistic depiction of the Negro in the film stands in contradiction to the fight for greater employment of Negro artists and workers in the motion-picture industry. The fight to eliminate stereotypes is not to be seen as leading to the elimination of the Negro artist from the industry; it is, rather, a fight for content and form that will enable the Negro artist to express himself with

dignity. It is a fight for the *greater* employment of Negro film artists and workers—not less. The perpetuation of the stereotype on the celluloid helps perpetuate the discrimination against Negroes at the employment office. This is true not only in the general sense; by limiting the use of Negro artists to the stereotype, films of white-chauvinist content drastically delimit the types of roles for which Negro artists are employed.

Since the film industry draws upon crafts and talents of other art forms, and since the development of personnel in these component professions takes place outside of Hollywood, the problem here presented extends beyond the film workers themselves. The white supremacists like to advance the argument that there are no Negroes qualified to work in the component arts and crafts of film making. This is a rationalization and a subterfuge resting basically upon the racist notion of Negro "inferiority." Actually, the whole rotten system of Jim Crow keeps thousands of Negroes from the schools and other training areas of skills and talents; even those few who manage to get some training meet a closed door. In spite of this, hundreds and thousands of Negro and men and women in all of the art professions, overcoming chauvinist barriers, have proved their talents splendidly. There is no excuse for denying job opportunities to Negro actors, writers, directors, cameramen, scenic designers, composers and instrumentalists, dancers, or workers in any of the related fields. The workers in Hollywood, and the workers in all of the cultural media, through their unions and other organizations, share the responsibility—in the interest of *all*, Negro and white—to open up training areas for Negro artists and craftsmen, to end the shameful, anti-human, and anti-cultural practices of racist discrimination.

Any and every re-issue of such racist films as *The Birth of a Nation* must be met with prompt and decisive action by the mass organizations and all partisans of peace and democracy—in the form of picket-lines, leaflets, mass delegations, letters and telegrams of protest. Any and every new film which libels the Negro people must be greeted with a similar mass protest.

The times call for a progressive organization in Hollywood to focus national and world attention on the systematic anti-

Negro job discrimination in every phase of film-making and to expose the old and "New Look" anti-Negro bias in film content. Movie goers *can* be reached with the facts.

We must press through effective united-front audience organization—which can and must be established—for ever greater and better output of films honestly depicting the life and struggles of the Negro people and for the outlawry of anti-Negro and all other racist and chauvinist themes and clichés on the screen. Such an audience formation, to be a force in the land, would need to be based on the developing movement against war and fascism; on trade unions and other working-class organizations; on organizations of the Negro people; on fraternal orders, parents' groups, churches, national group societies, cultural bodies, women's and youth organizations, etc.

At the same time, greater publicity and support than ever before must be given to all independent efforts to film and exhibit genuinely realistic motion pictures dealing with Negro themes. There is today a real possibility for securing support for independent production and exhibition of films dealing with the heroic history of the Negro people and with their present militant struggles. When shall we have a film dramatizing the life of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth?

Independent film production should mean independent of bourgeois control and ideology. Thus, independent of the monopolies *merely* is not independent in the true, class sense. Independent film productions must endeavor to give truthful expression to Negro life and struggle, to Negro cultural achievements and strivings, whether the theme be historical or contemporary, whether the treatment be documentary or fictional. The development of truthful Negro productions entails the building of Negro people's independent film producing companies.* Negro culture has the right to its fullest expression. A minimum requirement must involve the creative

* This should be seen in contradistinction to the "independent" (in reality, dependent on Hollywood) commercial producers of Jim-Crow films, which are inferior in quality and patterned generally on Hollywood prejudices and stereotypes.

control of the project by Negro artists, which, of course, does not mean exclusion of white participation.

A vital need is greater mobilization of support for the honest and progressive artists in Hollywood fighting against the un-American thought-control agents, who are, not by accident, among the most notorious of the white supremacists.

In the developing struggle against the blacklisting and censoring of every man and woman in the arts who will not bend the knee to the pro-fascists and the warmakers, the fight against Jim Crow must be made a central issue. White artists cannot expect Negro artists to support them in their anti-blacklist fight unless that fight also means war on Jim-Crow policies. For, with right the Negro artist of stage, screen, and radio can say: "We've been blacklisted and censored as a people long before the present scourge of blacklist and censorship. If we're going to fight together on this issue, will you fight against Jim Crow?"

The trade unions and guilds in the movie industry especially face the task of fighting resolutely to combat racist content and root out discrimination and segregation in every aspect of film production and theatre exhibition. This fight, which can best be initiated through unified action by all unions and guilds in the cultural field, must be broadened to involve the general labor movement and the people's mass organizations. It is a major responsibility of the white progressive forces, Communists and non-Communists, to wage this struggle as a basic determinant of Negro and white unity. Upon the Communist and progressive members falls the main responsibility of bringing the talent guilds and trade unions into the range of struggle around all the vital issues.

Finally, great stress has to be placed on the role of honest and courageous comment and criticism. In this respect, the *Daily Worker* has played a leading and inspiring role. Over the years this fighting working-class paper has ceaselessly and vigorously campaigned against the entire system of racist falsification on the commercial screen and has striven to present the truth about the life and struggles of the Negro people and their national-liberation movement. The columns and reviews of David Platt have made a particularly valuable contribution

in exposing the vicious white-supremacist ideology of the Hollywood films.

Scientific criticism of films dealing with Negro life requires as its basis the Marxist-Leninist teaching on the relationship of art and society and especially the teaching on the national question, with its concrete application to the national-liberation movement of the Negro people. The Communist Party, guiding itself by this understanding of the Negro question, has played the role of vanguard in the struggle against the racism and white chauvinism permeating capitalist America. The Communist Party will relentlessly continue this struggle until the working class, by forging an ever firmer alliance with the Negro people and its other allies, will establish the final guarantees for a true representation of the full stature of the Negro people on the screen, and will create the conditions for the Negro people to come fully into its own in the life and art of a socialist America.



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